



Little notice for visit by famous black leader

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By ELISA TOMASZEWSKI
Evening News staff writer

Every so often, someone of national importance graces Monroe with a visit.

In the 20th century, the visitors have included President Howard Taft and Vice Presidents Richard M. Nixon, Hubert H. Humphrey and Dan Quayle. Even actor Jimmy Cagney stopped by in the 1940s to sell war bonds.

Much attention was paid to their visits. Much less notice, at least by the media, was given to an 1899 visit by the man who was the most influential black leader and educator in America at the time, Booker T. Washington.

A former slave from Virginia, he founded the Tuskegee Institute, the vocational school for blacks in Alabama now known as Tuskegee University.

He had the ear of Presidents William McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt, and the respect of industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie. W.E.B. Du Bois, who later would criticize Washington's public comments about civil rights, was an avid supporter at this time.

So it wasn't surprising that tickets sold quickly after The Monroe Democrat newspaper ran a front-page story on Jan. 19, 1899, announcing that Washington would be one of the featured speakers for Monroe High School's winter lecture series at the old Armory Opera House.

"... Mr. Washington has built up an institution that commands the respect and admiration of the world, for the work it is doing in the interests of the 10 million blacks of the country," the paper reported.

At the time, fewer than 30 blacks were living in Monroe, and they comprised less than 1 percent of the total population.

According to Dr. James DeVries' book on racial relations in Monroe, "Race and Kinship in a Midwestern Town," no black had ever garnered such favorable attention in the Monroe press.

Within a week of the Democrat's story, all the 50-cent reserve seats for the lecture were sold.

"I think there was a lot of interest because with his Atlanta Compromise, he fit with where Monroe people thought," Dr. DeVries said in an interview last week.

The Atlanta Compromise eventually led to the split with Du Bois and the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. It called for blacks to live with segregation and discrimination in return for economic advancement.

The speech, given in 1895, made him a national figure when he said: "In all things purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress. ... The wisest among my race understand that the agitation

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Tickets to an appearance by Booker T. Washington in Monroe sold quickly, but his speech got a less than favorable review in the press.

Booker T. Washington

Looking back (cont.)

of questions of social equality is the extreme folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle, rather than of artificial forcing.

... It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera house."

That speech, given 100 years ago, made Washington the successor to Frederick Douglass, who had died that year.

But when Washington arrived at the Armory Opera House in Monroe, the newspaper wrote very little — only a few sentences in a story buried on Page 5. It gave no indication of what he said, and

claimed that he was an awkward speaker.

That flies in the face of other accounts, which describe Washington as a passionate, although sometimes nervous, speaker. He was a prolific writer, and his speeches, have been regarded as well-written and poignant.

The Democrat didn't think so. The story said: "The lecture by Booker T. Washington Monday evening was largely attended and proved to be the star number of the course. While the speaker did not come up to the expectations of the audience in some respects, he nevertheless provided himself to be an orator of great ability."

The newspaper does not indicate what it thought the audience expected from Washington.

The remaining sentences in the story show that the Monroe press treated blacks with a patronizing attitude, whether they were local

residents or leaders of a national stature.

The story said, "He gave a fine description of the work in which he is engaged in, and spoke entirely from the negro point of view. He left unsaid many things upon which the people would have liked to have heard him express his opinion.

"Mr. Washington is a mulatto, and upon the whole makes an awkward appearance upon the stage, but through his zeal, and intelligent handling of the negro question he has gained the respect of the whole country both north and south."

Dr. DeVries said in his book that the press was critical because Washington, dubbed "The Moses of the Negro Race," was not what Monroe residents expected.

"To Monroe citizens, the simple fact was that Mr. Washington, or any other Negro, did not belong on

the stage in an oratory capacity," Dr. DeVries wrote. "The crowd had come wondering if they would find a minstrel man and, to the audience, beneath his articulate veneer, Washington was just that; an out-of-place, awkward mulatto with not a great deal to offer (except his 'intelligent handling of the negro question'). While the attack was muted because Washington was a well-respected national figure, it was still there."

Washington remained influential on the national scene until the end of his life, although the popularity of his views began to decline in 1910.

Many biographers claim that the views he espoused in the Atlanta Compromise were not his true philosophy, just his public one. Biographers have since argued that he silently worked to eliminate segregation and other Jim Crow laws. He died in 1915.