

AFRICAN-AMERICAN CONSULS ABROAD, 1897-1909

AT LEAST 20 BLACK CONSULS SERVED DURING THE REPUBLICAN ADMINISTRATIONS OF WILLIAM MCKINLEY AND THEODORE ROOSEVELT, WITH EIGHT OF THEM REMAINING ABROAD FOR A DECADE OR MORE. HERE ARE SOME OF THEIR STORIES.

By *BENJAMIN R. JUSTESEN*

Ever since the Reconstruction era, when President Ulysses Grant appointed the first black U.S. envoys to Haiti and Liberia, African-American diplomats have represented the United States with distinction abroad. To the limited extent that diplomatic historians have recognized these men's contributions and achievements, attention has traditionally been paid to the small number who served as U.S. ministers — precursors of ambassadors — to those two nations.

Yet the last decade of the 19th century and the first of the 20th also found African-Americans performing consular duties at more than a dozen foreign posts, both in independent nations like Brazil, France, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Russia and Venezuela, and in a number of European colonies in Africa and the Caribbean, including the Danish and French West Indies, Jamaica, Madagascar, Senegal and Sierra Leone. In all, at least 20 black consuls served during the Republican administrations of William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, between 1897 and 1909, with eight of them remaining abroad for a decade or more.

One consul trained an African queen in the equestrian arts and later became a fixture in French society circles for two decades; another, in his seventies, helped trap wild animals for shipment to the U.S. national zoo. A third held off rebel troops until U.S. troops could arrive to protect a Central American president from being overthrown, while a fourth received commendations from foreign governments for humanitarian and collegial efforts during two Asian wars.

Almost all were college graduates, many with professional degrees. A century later, however, these pioneering fig-

ures are scarcely known (partly because many of their posts no longer exist, long ago absorbed into larger consulates and embassies). But several of them have dramatic stories highly deserving of inclusion in the annals of diplomatic history.

Sharing the Spoils

Almost from his first week in office, Pres. McKinley was besieged by crowds of Republican applicants for consular positions and other federal patronage jobs, after the four-year Democratic hiatus under Cleveland. African-American office-seekers were especially persistent, visiting the White House on nearly a daily basis in March and April 1897, according to "At the White House," a column in the Washington, D.C., *Evening Star*. They were well aware that only a few applicants could receive the presidential favor they sought, due to the limited number of posts available. Even a strong recommendation by the nation's only black congressman, Rep. George Henry White, R-N.C., was not enough, as Capt. John Leach, recommended for the consulship at Victoria, British Columbia, discovered.

Perhaps the most celebrated failure was that of Chicago politician and journalist Cyrus Field Adams, a much-touted candidate for a high diplomatic post. Adams sought appointment in June 1897 as the first black U.S. minister to Bolivia, boasting exceptional linguistic skills — he spoke fluent Spanish and three other languages — and strong recommendations. But his resumé could not overcome historical and political obstacles. McKinley was keenly aware that the 1894 nomination by Grover Cleveland of Charles Henry James Taylor (1856-1899), briefly minister to Liberia in Cleveland's first term, to head the U.S. mission to Bolivia had ended badly — Senate opposition had forced Taylor to

withdraw and settle instead for the Recordship of Deeds for the District of Columbia. McKinley had no desire to repeat history.

Adams' quest led to no comparable consolation prize, although he later became assistant register of the U.S. Treasury. Also unsuccessful was Bostonian C. H. Kemp Spurgeon, who sought a West Indies consular appointment from McKinley in 1897. Spurgeon's favorable comments, however, on his treatment by State Department officials during his consultations were duly reported by the *Evening Star*: "I can say without fear of challenge, that the gentlemen I have met in the State Department and other public officials stand second to none for courteous and gentlemanly conduct. Such officials must cause the nation to be looked upon with respect. It makes one feel proud to be an American, either by birth or adoption."

But other candidates were successful in approaching McKinley and went on to prominence:

Mifflin Wistar Gibbs (1823-1915) was an influential Arkansas politician and lawyer who served as U.S. consul in the Madagascar seaport city of Tamatave (now Toamasina) from 1898 until 1901. (Gibbs was just one of at least 10 black consuls appointed during McKinley's first year in office.) The Oberlin College graduate and longtime federal officeholder, 74 at the time of his appointment, was one of the oldest men ever to serve as consul, but remained energetic, at one point helping to trap wild animals on the island for shipment back to the U.S. national zoo.

Gibbs resigned his consular commission in mid-1901, reportedly for reasons of ill health, but only after securing the appointment of vice consul William H. Hunt as his replacement.

William Henry Hunt (1869-1951), a New York Republican, began as a secretary to Gibbs, became vice consul and succeeded his future father-in-law as consul in Tamatave in 1901 — the first post in a 31-year career, and

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one of McKinley's last consular appointments before his death by assassination. In 1904, Hunt returned home on leave to marry Ida Gibbs, who had once urged her father to hire him, and the pair lived abroad for the next quarter-century. An accomplished horseman, Hunt had already gained some renown by reportedly teaching the Malagasy Queen Ranavalona III to ride.

After their 1906 transfer to Saint-Étienne, the Hunts became popular social leaders for 20 years in the French community, before a final series of briefer postings in Guadeloupe, the Azores and Liberia. Hunt retired in 1932, living quietly thereafter with his wife in Washington, D.C.

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Richard Theodore Greener (1844-1922), a native of Philadelphia, was the first black student to graduate from Harvard. He later became dean of the Howard University Law Department. Financial difficulties impelled him to seek a consular appointment in 1898, while living in New York. But he declined his first post — Bombay — as "not acceptable," apparently due to reports of a bubonic plague epidemic there. Re-

assigned to Vladivostok, his original title as consul was adjusted to commercial agent at the Russians' request. During a highly regarded seven-year stay, Greener oversaw the interests of vacated diplomatic missions during the Russo-Japanese war and earned a decoration from the Chinese government for famine relief efforts in North China after the Boxer Rebellion.

Unsubstantiated charges of improper conduct forced his dismissal in 1905, however, and despite strenuous efforts to gain a formal hearing, Greener never managed to clear his name or return to service. Considered one of the most brilliant black intellectuals of his generation, Greener wrote extensively in retirement, supporting women's rights and Irish liberation, among other causes.

Other McKinley appointees in 1897 and 1898 included **Mahlon B. Van Horne** (1878-1910) of Rhode Island, a Lincoln University graduate who served as consul for six years in St. Thomas, Danish West Indies; **John N. Ruffin** (dates not available) of Tennessee, consul for a decade in Asuncion, Paraguay; attorney **Louis Addison Dent** (1863-1947) of Washington, D.C., named consul for a second time in Kingston, Jamaica, after a brief posting there late in the Harrison administration; and Dr. **John Taylor Williams**

(1859-1924) of North Carolina, consul for eight years in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Three other trained physicians selected as consuls by McKinley were Dr. **George H. Jackson** (b. 1877) of Connecticut, who was assigned first to Cognac, France, then quickly transferred to La Rochelle; Dr. **Lemuel Walter Livingston** (1861-1930) of Florida, consul for two decades in Cap Haitien, Haiti; and Dr. **Henry Watson Furniss** (1868-1955) of Indiana, consul in Bahia, Brazil, until 1905, when he was named U.S. minister to Haiti.

In addition, attorney **Campbell L. Maxwell** (d. 1920) of Ohio, first appointed consul in Santo Domingo in 1892 by President Harrison, was recalled to service in 1898 by McKinley and elevated to consul general, a title Maxwell retained for six years. There he replaced Grover Cleveland's consul, African American attorney **Archibald H. Grimké** (1849-1930) of Massachusetts, who

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had stubbornly hoped to be retained by McKinley despite political differences.

Not all posts previously given black consuls received them again under McKinley, however. Santos, Brazil, where **Henry C. Smith** (dates not available) of Alabama had served for

three years under Cleveland, went to a Caucasian applicant; likewise, Saint Paul de Loanda, Portuguese West Africa, where **Henry Francis Downing** (1846-1928) of New York had served for a year under Cleveland in the 1880s. And those who were selected sometimes had to settle for a second or third choice. Livingston, for example, had initially sought the consulship in Valparaiso, Chile, but adjusted well to Cap Haitien, where he served for more than two decades and remained until his death.

A "Lily White" Resurgence

After McKinley's initial flurry of black diplomatic appointments — which also included New Jersey educator **William Frank Powell** (1848-1920), U.S. minister to Haiti and chargé d'affaires in Santo Domingo from 1897 to 1905, and North Carolina clergyman **Owen Lun West Smith** (1851-1920), U.S. minister to Liberia from 1898 to 1902 — the



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surge of applicants subsided. The emergence of the “lily white” Republican faction, followed by McKinley’s assassination in September 1901, ended lingering hopes for a second large round of African-American appointments.

New president Theodore Roosevelt, who depended heavily on the cautious advice of Booker T. Washington, was generally apathetic toward black appointments. But Roosevelt retained many McKinley appointees and made limited efforts to appoint other black consuls during his first term. When he took office in 1901, the consular service was a vast, far-flung operation, with 39 consulates general, 255 consulates and 23 commercial agencies. According to a State Department report described the next month in the *Evening Star*, the consular service had 1,100 employees, compared to a work force of 99 for the department proper.

Roosevelt’s most well-known appointment was probably that of future civil rights leader **James Weldon Johnson** (1871-1938), a Florida native and attorney who entered consular service in 1906. Between 1906 and 1913, he served as consul in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, and in Corinto, Nicaragua. During the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1912, he helped stall rebel fighters from entering Corinto until U.S. military forces could arrive to shore up the regime of President Adolfo Diaz. His performance was highly rated, leading to his serious consideration for two more demanding posts outside the Western Hemisphere (Goree-Dakar and Nice).

Johnson’s efforts to gain a European posting, particularly after his marriage, may have undermined his chances to continue as a consular officer after the election of Democrat Woodrow Wilson in November 1912; tentatively slated for reassignment to

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the Azores, he resigned six months after Wilson’s inauguration. But Johnson went on to fame as an attorney, teacher, author and secretary of the NAACP.

Both Johnson’s credentials and references had been impeccable. But in some cases, the political patronage associated with consular appointments made selection a riskier task. The disgrace of Roosevelt’s first major African-American ministerial appointment, Dr. **John R. A. Crossland** (1864-1950) of Missouri — sent to Monrovia in 1902 — may have dampened his already limited enthusiasm for black appointees. Crossland eagerly accepted the posting as minister to Liberia, but his diplomatic career ended abruptly, just eight months later, when a spicy local scandal forced his hasty departure and replacement. His successor, **Ernest Lyon** (1860-1938), a minister and naturalized U.S. citizen born of African parents in Honduras, served more creditably — and circumspectly — as U.S. minister to Liberia for seven years, from 1903 until 1910.

Most notable among the new consuls was **Christopher Harrison Payne** (1848-1925) of West Virginia, a minister, editor and lawyer named in 1903 to the consulship at St. Thomas, Danish West Indies. Payne, 55 when he succeeded Van Horne at St. Thomas, remained there for the rest of his life. After the U.S. government purchased the islands from Denmark in 1917, Payne retired from federal service to practice law there, also acting as prosecuting attorney and police judge in the capital, Charlotte Amalie. Also appointed in 1903, Dr. **G. Jarvis Bowens** (b. 1869), a Norfolk, Virginia, physician, became consul in Guadeloupe, where he remained for nearly five years.

Former Kingston consul **Louis Dent**, once a favored aide to Secretary of State James G. Blaine, sought to return to consular service in 1904. He had resigned the Kingston consulship in 1899, after an admirable performance during the war with Spain, to be appointed as D.C. Registrar of Wills. Offered an appointment with less appealing geography this time — Dawson City in Canada’s Northwest Territories — Dent accepted, but two months later chose to resign rather than proceed to post. Another 1904 appointment went to New York journalist **Jerome Bowers Peterson** (1860-1943), who became consul in Puerto Cabello, but resigned a year later.

Two early Liberian appointments below the rank of consul were also notable. In 1902, Roosevelt selected 25-year-old lawyer **George Washington Ellis** (1875-1919) of Washington, D.C., later confirmed by the Senate, to succeed **James Robert Spurgeon** (dates not available), the outgoing legation secretary in Monrovia. Ellis was induced to accept the post primarily because of his passionate interests in the ethnological, sociological and linguistic characteristics of Liberia’s inland tribes. In addition to

official duties, he was allowed to conduct lengthy expeditions into the hinterlands, sending back both a wide variety of specimens and well-regarded reports. Despite poor health, Ellis served with distinction in Monrovia for nearly eight years. In 1903, Roosevelt gave the title of vice consul-general in Monrovia to **Alexander Priestly Camphor** (1865-1919) of Louisiana, an American minister already living in Liberia, where he served as president of the College of West Africa. Camphor served in his dual capacity until his 1908 return to the United States; he was succeeded as vice consul-general by Texan **John H. Reed** (b. 1862), who served there for seven years.

Roosevelt retained several McKinley appointees at their existing posts, including Williams, Ruffin and Greener, whose tours all ended during Roosevelt's second term; Furniss (who would soon receive a significant promotion); Jackson, who returned to Cognac in 1908 and remained in France for a total of 16 years; and Livingston, whose Haitian posting ended in 1919. One of the few McKinley appointees not serving past 1904 was Maxwell, who resigned after the appointment of the first U.S. minister to the Dominican Republic that same year.

In 1904, Roosevelt also made two significant innovations at Port-au-Prince, first by promoting the long-time vice-consul-general, **John B. Terres** (d. 1920) of North Carolina — at post since 1880 — to the rank of consul, and then making history by assigning West Point graduate Major **Charles Young** (1864-1922) of Ohio as the first black U.S. military attaché.

During his second term, beginning in 1905, Roosevelt appointed a handful of new African-American consuls, first selecting attorney **Herbert Richard Wright** (b. 1879)

Teddy Roosevelt was cautious in his appointments of African-American diplomats, but did retain many of McKinley's choices and appointed a few more.

of Iowa as consul in Utila, Honduras. Reassigned in 1908 to Puerto Cabello, Wright remained in Venezuela until his 1917 retirement. Also in 1905, Roosevelt elevated Furniss, then consul in Bahia, to succeed Powell as U.S. minister to Haiti, where he remained until 1913.

In 1906, Secretary of State Elihu Root decided to reorganize the nation's consular service, instituting an entrance examination and raising annual salaries — ranging from \$2,000 to \$12,000 — in an attempt to attract a higher caliber of applicant. Soon after Root's recommendations were adopted, Roosevelt named three new black consuls: **James Weldon Johnson**, who succeeded Peterson in Puerto Cabello; **James G. Carter** (b. 1870) of Georgia, to succeed Hunt at Tamatave; and Dr. **William James Yerby** (1867-1950) of Tennessee, to succeed Williams in Freetown. Johnson's next post was Corinto (1909), while Carter remained at Tamatave until his 1916 transfer to Tananarive. Yerby moved on in 1912 to Dakar, Senegal, as the next post in a lengthy career including postings in La Rochelle and Nantes, France; Oporto, Portugal; and Freetown,

Sierra Leone.

In 1906, Roosevelt also re-assigned Hunt to Saint-Étienne, while offering a lower-level appointment to **Edmond Autex Burrill** (b. 1874) of Washington, D.C., a recent graduate of the Howard University pharmacy department, as vice consul in Puerto Cabello, under Hunt. Transferred a year later to Saint-Étienne, where he again served as vice consul under Hunt, Burrill resigned in 1912.

Of all the appointees during the 12-year period, only four continued their careers into the 1920s. Two went on to enter formal careers as Foreign Service officers, under the terms of the 1924 Rogers Act legislation: Hunt and Yerby, who each served a variety of posts before their retirements in the 1930s. Terres died at his post in Haiti in late 1920, a remarkable four decades after entering government service. Carter remained in Madagascar until 1927, declining the appointment as U.S. minister to Liberia offered him that year by President Calvin Coolidge. Assigned instead as consul to Calais, France, Carter remained there until 1940. After a brief wartime tour as consul at Bordeaux, he returned in 1941 to Madagascar, where he was promoted to the rank of consul general before retiring in 1942.

Eventually their trail would be followed by many more African-American Foreign Service officers, gradually expanding career horizons well beyond Africa and the Caribbean and their professional responsibilities into all functional specialties. Gibbs and Johnson, among others, penned compelling autobiographies highlighting their adventures abroad. Yet the legacy of these early African-American consular officers remains a barely explored, fascinating niche of America's diplomatic history. ■