

Project- Negroes of New York
Editor- Mr. Ottley
Reporter- Mr. Robinson

BIOGRAPHY OF EDWARD E. (CHIEF) LEE.

Edward E. Lee was born in Johnsville, Fairfax County, Va, in 1849. In early manhood he became a hotel bellman and came to New York in his late twenties. Here he worked as a hotel bellman and became the head bellman for a string of hotels among which were the old Murray Hill Hotel and the Plaza. It was as the "chief" of the bellman of these hotels that he received his nickname of "Chief", which never left him even after he was long out of the hotel business.

As the "Chief" bellman he came into contact with many influential New Yorkers including the late Richard Croker, Tammany Hall chief.

It was in the closing years of the century that many colored Republican voters began to express their discontent with the treatment meted out to them by their party. Although the Rev. Dr. Lyon of the St. Marks Methodist Episcopal Church made many campaign promises to his constituents in return for a vote for McKinley, these promises were not fulfilled after McKinley won. A Meeting of the Colored Republican County Committee met and demanded of Lemuel Eli Quigg, County Chairman, that a Negro Dr. P. A. Johnson be run for coroner. Quigg refused.

Thence a committee of colored voters breaking away from the Republican Party visited Boss Croker and asked him to make pledges to them. This committee headed by Dr. E. P. Roberts, Andrew M. Robinson,

Edward Latibue, Dr. John R. Hillery was told by the Tammany head that "a colored man will be placed in every department of city government" if Tammany made a sweep. Edward (Chief) Lee was designated by Croker to lead the colored voters into the waiting arms of the Democratic Party.

It was thus in January 1898 that the United Colored Democracy of Tammany Hall was organized with Lee as its leader. The reports are that in the following year it greatly helped the municipal victory of the Tammany Democratic Organization. But although the organization flourished, it was seriously hampered by the hostile attitude of the people against the Democrats. It was a common thing in the closing years of the century and the first of the new for speakers to be driven from platforms, for missiles to be hurled from windows at open air meetings, etc.

Chief Lee retired from leadership in 1902 and was succeeded by Mr. John Bell. After Bell in a few years, Galeb A. Simms was named leader but a month after taking office he was assassinated. Dickerson succeeded him until 1906 when Lee again returned to leadership and held it until 1911.

It was then that the organization began to flourish and gain a foothold in the rapidly filling new Harlem area. A fight for leadership in 1911 between Chief Lee and his redoubtable "Old Guard" was lost to Robert N. Wood and his younger "progressives".

Through his consistent championship of the cause of Tammany Hall, Chief Lee succeeded in breaking down the bars of prejudice against Negroes in many city departments. It was through his efforts that James P. Carr was appointed the first colored deputy assistant District Attorney in 1899. Lee, himself, became a deputy sheriff of

New York County and has been on the city payroll continuously since the beginning of the century. When he passed away at the venerable age of 80 on March 9, 1929 he was a corporation inspector.

Although he was a member of many fraternal organizations, he was most proud of the fact that he was the first honorary member of the Monarch Lodge of the IBPOE, No. 45.

He was survived by a brother in Washington D. C. and several nieces in New York. His wife died about 1924.

He always displayed a life interest in the young colored youth, remembering the difficult days when he came up from the south to make his way in the big city and therefore helped many students seeking professional training to get work so as to aid them through college.

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"CHIEF LEE "

The following assignment on Chief Lee proved to be rather a headache. Material in print on Lee is consistent. in its lack of information. Thus, for example, the New York Times during the years from 1913 to 1931 contained no references to him at all. (I checked the Times Indexes from 1913-1931 looking for obituary notice, etc.) The New York Age obituary eventually gave me the date of his death. The Amsterdam News account contained no real information except for the announcement and time, place, etc. of burial. The New York State Contender in its article on the United Colored Democracy had some data but it was a duplication of material I had secured from an interview with Mr. Morton, Civil Service commissioner. Mr. Morton in our interview was vague on dates but managed to limit himself to within three years of any actual data. I checked several books on Tammany Hall history and found nothing. I did locate a reference to Lee in the Tribune during the year of 1902. I understand that another mention of him was made in 1909 which was found by Jordan and turned in to our office. This was an announcement of Lee's appointment as a deputy sheriff. The assignment was becoming discouraging when quite by accident I ran into a member of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief. He filled in the gap that knocked the various pieces together. He also gave me additional information as to the whereabouts of the present historian for the Society and

left me with the impression that we could probably secure access to its documents, etc. Turned over the information to Beanne. Through other interviews with some of my acquaintances and friends in Harlem, I arrived at the story of the man, Lee, himself.)

Edward E. Lee was born in Jonesville, Fairfax County, Virginia(1) either in 1849 or 1850. No information is available as to Lee's activities until his arrival in New York City thirty-years later. Shortly after his arrival in the City, Lee secured a job as a bellboy at the Murray Hill hotel. He was properly diligent and subserviant and was apt in acquiring the professional tricks of his trade. By 1897 or earlier he had become the head bell-hop of the Murray Hill Hotel and the Plaza Hotel. In the line of duty, Lee was known throughout the city by the bigwigs whose favorite hangout, historians say, was the free lunch counter and bar in the Murray Hill Hotel. Among those who frequented the bar, was Richard Croker, the boss of Tammany Hall.

In the Mayoralty elections of 1897, Tammany was faced with a reform movement headed by the Hon. Seth Low of the Citizens Union. Croker, fearing the outcome of the election through the opposition of the Republican ticket headed by Benjamin F. Tracey, sought out the loopholes that might weaken Tammany's opponents. He therefore approached several individuals in the Negro community to wean away the traditional colored Republican vote with the patronage promise to "place at least one colored man in every department of the city government" if that could be accomplished.(2)

Croker's political acumen soon had the colored community in an uproar. The pro-Tammany forces were so vociferous in proclaiming the raw deal given the colored man by the Republican Party that results were quickly obtained. Their meetings were broken up, their parades

were frequently drenched under showers of debris, water, etc. by indignant conservative and die-hard Republicans. (3) The Democrats (Tammany) came through the election with approximately one thousand colored votes.

Crocker was quick to recognize the signs, and following the election of Tammany-man Robert A. Van Wyck, set about searching for a man who could carry out Tammany orders--remain loyal to Crocker, and continue organizing the Tammany wedge in the Republican stronghold. Edward E. Lee filled the requirements and Crocker set him up on West 53rd Street with a Tammany Club with the name United Colored Democracy.

Crocker, sagaciously, kept his patronage promises through Lee and undoubtedly received the lion's share of the prices paid for the city jobs. Thus, Lee approached one man, eager for a city job, with a request for \$300. The applicant being unable to secure the amount, Lee went elsewhere and probably got the money. (5)

Still another practice of Lee, who became known as "Chief" in most quarters and in others as the "Black Crocker" was to make the more fortunate colored city employees "pony up" with an additional \$5.00 every month for the support and maintenance of the club headquarters. (6) (This was later raised to 5% of their monthly wages-). (7)

Lee held the reins of the United Colored Democracy until 1902 into the Tammany era of Charles Murphy. Murphy held no brief for Lee and a struggle for leadership was waged in Lee's stronghold.

A significant item soon appeared in the New York Tribune stating that:

".....Edward E. Lee, the "Black Croker", in a letter to the (leaders) of Tammany Hall,... resigned as leader of the United Colored Democracy of Greater New York. The reason given for his resignation is that the triumvirate (Big Chiefs of Tammany) refuse to recognize him. " (8)

Lee was not through, however, The United Colored Democracy leadership lacked the experience of Lee and in 1906, he was back in the saddle. Lee was not to relinquish his leadership until 1911.(9)

In 1909, Lee was rewarded by Tammany for his faithful service and was appointed a deputy sheriff in Julius Harberger's Office. (10)

When leadership of the U. C. D. left his hands, Lee remained quiescent carrying out his duties as a deputy sheriff.

During John F. Hylan's first term in 1918 Lee was given a job as a Corporation Inspector which he held until his death. (11)

Lee died on March 9, 1929 at the Wiley Wilson Sanitarium and his funeral was attended by many of his political friends.

"Chief" Lee, according to one of his political followers, was not the best type of leader for the U.C.D. for he lacked the necessary training and qualities. (12) Other opinions of Lee were that he was a subserviant man with an outstretched begging hand, (13) an Uncle "Tom" (14) and possibly a former slave. (15)

On the other hand, Lee was considered to be a man with a great deal of native intelligence, uncultured true, but with sound wisdom of men and politics and the organization of both. (16)

Notes:

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- 1) New York Age, Mar. 16, 1929
 - 2) N.Y. State Contender, Oct. 5, 1929
 - 3) ditto
 - 4) Interview with Mr. Morton.
 - 5) Interview with member of the NY African Soc. for Mut. Relief (Mr. Smith or X as he preferred to call himself.)
 - 6) ditto
 - 7) Gary on our staff.
 - 8) N.Y. Tribune, Aug. 8, 1902 p. 2 col. 4
 - 9) N.Y. State Contender, Oct. 5, 1929
 - 10) Mr. Morton
 - 11) Mr. Morton
 - 12) ditto
 - 13) (see #5 above)
 - 14) Richard Huey (interview).
 - 15) Mr. Morton
 - 16) ditto