

Wilbur Young

Chap. VII

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Biography of Charles Bennett Ray

Charles Bennett Ray, a Negro scholar, minister, editor, and abolitionist was born in Falmouth, Massachusetts on Christmas day, 1807.¹ He was the son of Joseph Aspinwall Ray, a well respected and intelligent resident of Falmouth who served twenty-eight years as a mail carrier between Falmouth and Martha's Vineyard. His mother's maiden name was Annie Harrington, a sober and religious woman of high capabilities.

Young Charles Ray was the eldest of seven children which included four boys and three girls. He received his early education at the local school and academy. At the completion of his early education, he was sent to his grandfather's farm in Westerly, Rhode Island, where he worked for five years. From here he went to Vineyard Haven where he studied a bootmaker's trade after which, he resolved to study for the ministry.

Ray realized his ambition when he entered Wesleyan Seminary at Middletown, Connecticut. Here he completed his course and in due time, was ready to go out on his own.

Arriving in New York City in 1832, Ray opened a boot and shoe shop for a while. He met and married Henrietta Greene Regulus and upon her death, married Charlotte Augusta Burrough of Savannah, Georgia. From this union he had seven children: four of which died at an early age.

By 1837, Mr. Ray became associated with the anti-slavery Negro paper "The Colored American" for which he wrote articles and traveled and lectured in both the East and West.²

In 1838, he became part owner of the paper and the following year, took the managing editorship which position he kept until its demise in 1842. In the columns of this newspaper, Ray became one of the champions of his race in the struggle against slavery. And also served as a social for Colored New Yorkers; for it must be remembered that this was the third Negro paper to make its appearance in America and the only existent one at the time Ray also fought for temperance for his people. Using his exact quotation concerning his paper, he stated:

"The object of this paper is for the moral; social; and political elevation and improvement of free colored people and the peaceful emancipation of the enslaved."³

For forty years, Ray was a member of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, a large anti-slavery body, organized in 1810, and he presided as the president of the society for eight years.

Numerous are the tales told about his activities in the anti-slavery movements. He was a friend of Reverend Henry Ward Beecher and visited his "Playmouth Church" in Brooklyn many times. He was also an active member of the "Underground Railroad System" and on one occasion, he aided a party of twenty-eight escaped

slaves, ranging from a grandmother to a child of five, make their way across the Canadian Border.⁴

So well known was he as a benefactor of slaves that on one occasion, when a runaway slave knocked at his door by chance and learned that it was Ray, he whistled and fourteen more comrades came out of hiding and they were all accommodated.

During this time, Ray also found time to serve as secretary of the Vigilance Committee, an organization of Negroes and Whites, founded to aid all escaped slaves and prevent their arrest. The president of this organization was Gerritt Smith, white, the great philanthropist who later gave 3000 Negroes of New York 140,000 acres of land in New York State, a feat which has never since been surpassed and at the same time, made him one of the true benefactors of the Negro race.⁵

In 1845, Ray was installed as pastor of Bethesda Congregational Church. The sermon for the occasion was preached by the Reverend Samuel D. Cochrane, the church's present minister. He was given the right hand of fellowship by the Reverend Simeon S. Jocelyn with Lewis Tappan making the address.⁶

Reverend Charles Ray remained as pastor for twenty years, during which time he engaged in missionary work, aided seamen, and assisted in the founding a Congregational Church in Brooklyn, and acted as assistant pastor in charge of the colored home.

The following from a speech shows the interest that Ray had in the education of his people:

"Another feature of my work has been as it still is, with no less interest, the education of the rising generation, the only legacy the poor have for their children and better than which they cannot give them; this I have made a point ever to urge and inculcate, both upon parents and children. What better work can anyone have before him -- yea, what so good for this life -- than to interest the people to avail themselves of these facilities for their children! I can never lose interest in this work as I have never ceased to inculcate it."⁷

In July 1863, Ray mentions the harrowing experiences of the Great Riot of New York City, in which, defenseless Negroes were the victims.⁸ Beaten and driven from their homes which were set afire, the Negro population was in a panic. Many lives were lost and in no part of the city were they safe from the angry fury of the white mobsters, who, blamed them for the draft riots. The burden to restore the calm and order fell directly on the shoulders of the Negro pastors, who aided in their work by a donation of \$50,000 by the merchants of the city for the relief of these persecuted Negroes.⁹

On August 15th, 1886, Charles Ray died suddenly from a heart attack. He was buried on August 19th, at Cypress Hills Cemetery. His funeral was preached by his old associate, the aged Reverend Amos N. Freeman of Siloam Church in Brooklyn. Thus, culminated one of the most colorful; intellectual; fearless; and worthy

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characters to be produced among the Negro race at that time. Ray lived in New York for fifty-six years and died at the age of seventy nine.

Additional notes on the life of Charles B. Ray are brought out in a eulogy by H. H. McFarland which is the following:

"He was a man of sincere heart, of earnest convictions, of patient energy, of wide intelligence and strong christian faith and character.

"Born under conditions that were to him wicked prejudice, and made it difficult for him to secure an education and collectively his indomitable energy and his faith in God, he won for himself an honored place in the Kingdom of Christ on earth. Especially was he an active leader in the work for the emancipation of the slaves and did much for the instruction and elevation of the Negro in the North."¹⁰

Bibliography

Sketch of the life of Charles Bennett Ray by his family

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Documentation

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1. Sketch of the life of Charles B. Ray by his family published by J. J. Little & Company 10-20 Astor Place, New York City 1887 page 1.
2. ibid page 10
3. Carter G. Woodson's Journal of Negro History Volume XVI, 1931, Leo. H. Hirsch's thesis on the Negro in New York 1783- 1865 page 445
4. Sketch of the life of Charles B. Ray by his family (see 1.) page 35-36
5. ibid page 20
6. ibid pages 17-18
7. ibid page 15
8. ibid page 48
9. ibid page 50
10. ibid pages 78-79