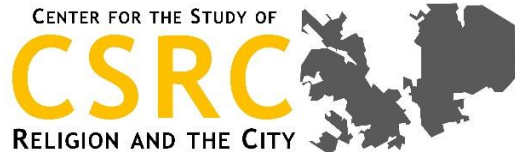


The Thought of George Freeman Bragg

A Critical Examination of Tensions Between His Racial Consciousness and Support of Lost Cause Ideology

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Historian Wilson Jeremiah Moses has observed that "all active thinking runs unavoidably into contradiction."¹ If Moses's observation is correct, then the historian of intellectual history will inevitably find contradictions and tensions in the thoughts of prominent thinkers. This insight characterizes the thought of one of Maryland's adopted sons, the Reverend George Freeman Bragg, Jr. (1863-1940). As a civil rights activist and rector of the historic St. James Episcopal Church in Baltimore from 1892 to 1940, Bragg wore many hats and was a man of tremendous energy and intellectual ability. Such can be seen in his fondness for the written word as Bragg was both an accomplished historian and journalist. Many of his writings addressed issues related to the richness of African American history and the fight against white supremacy. Such writings suggest that Bragg was imbued with a strong racial consciousness that railed against racism and privileged African American agency. Yet some of Bragg's writings and public activities appeared

¹ Wilson Jeremiah Moses. *Creative Conflict in African American Thought: Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, And Marcus Garvey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xi.

to challenge if not undermine his racial consciousness. Indeed, one aspect of his thought, which was in tension with his racial consciousness was his adoption of aspects of the racist ideology of the Lost Cause. The following article will examine the tension in Bragg's thought by juxtaposing his racial consciousness with his adoption of certain aspects of Lost-Cause ideology.

There is no universally agreed upon definition of racial consciousness. For the purposes of this article, racial consciousness is defined as an ideology steeped in ideas of racial pride and solidarity, which honors the history and culture of African Americans. It also incorporates ideas of political and social agitation against racial oppression and accords a special place of honor for African Americans who were freedom fighters. Hence, on October 10, 1933, Bragg attended a commemoration event to honor an African American named Heyward Shepherd. On the surface Bragg's attendance at this event may seem to be in league with the aforementioned understanding of racial consciousness which he embodied, but this particular event was sponsored by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) and the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV). The UDC and SCV, which were founded on September 10, 1894, in Nashville, Tennessee, and on July 1, 1896, in Richmond, Virginia, respectively, were major proponents of the racist myth of the Lost Cause. Lost Cause mythology emerged in the wake of the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War and proponents of this idea sought to redeem the image of the Confederacy and the American South. In part, they attempted to accomplish this by changing the historical facts surrounding the nature and character of southern slavery. Hence, they argued that southern slavery was not a barbaric institution premised on the suffering of black bodies but a benevolent institution full of happy, contented slaves and loving, paternal slave masters.

Integral to this revisionist effort was the idea of the *faithful slave*. Such slaves, according to Lost Cause lore, were not only contented in their lot as slaves but had an undying loyalty and love for their masters. Shephard was believed to be such a slave by the UDC/SCV as well as many in the African American community in the 1930s. This belief was based on faulty assumptions, misinformation, and conjecture. First, it should be noted that Shephard was not a slave but a free black man. He was a railroad porter who was fatally shot by John Brown and his men on the night of Brown's famous raid on the arsenal in Harper's Ferry, Virginia in 1859. Because this raid was part of a scheme to free the enslaved black masses by means of armed revolt, it was assumed that Brown killed Shephard because he believed Shephard intended to leak the details of the plot to the authorities. There was no evidence to prove this assumption definitively, and just before he died, Shephard stated that he did not know why he was shot. Such facts notwithstanding, the UDC/SCV propped Shephard up as an exemplary example of the *faithful slave* while African Americans viewed him as a disgrace to his race.²

Despite the public outcry from the African American community against the Shephard Memorial Bragg wholeheartedly endorsed and participated in this event sponsored by the UDC. He gave it his blessing by providing the benediction. He also thought the lectures given by the guests were praiseworthy.³ Such earned the ire of African American civil rights giant W.E.B. DuBois who considered Bragg's participation in the memorial a "disgrace."⁴ Such criticism notwithstanding Bragg seemed to concur with the UDC/SCV's general monument movement to

² Calhoun E. Green, "Harper's Ferry Hopes Dr. Bragg Will Stay Home," *Afro-American*, October 17, 1931, 23, ProQuest.

³ Mary Johnson, "An 'Ever Present Bone of Contention': The Heyward Shephard Memorial," *West Virginia History* 56 (1997): 2.

⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, "John Brown," *The Crisis* Volume 41, No. January 1, 1932, 467.

honor *faithful slaves*. This is evidenced by Bragg's support of the movement to memorialize the image of the *black mammy* with a monument. The *black mammy* was yet another iteration of the racist *faithful slave* myth. According to Lost Cause lore, the *black mammy* was a happy, contented, loyal slave who loved her slave master's family more than she loved her own. Nonetheless, Bragg believed she epitomized culture and refinement as a result of her proximity to her slave master in the "great house." Indeed, Bragg saw the "great house" during the antebellum period as "the center of the best culture and civilization."⁵ In an article entitled, "The Black Mammy" Bragg stated:

That class of Southern white people who were able to afford the luxury of having 'Black Mammies' for their children, with respect to political and other matters, it would be extremely ungracious on our part to question their sense of high honor, and possession of those finer qualities which have always separated the refined from the vulgar.⁶

However, some of Bragg's contemporaries viewed the "great house" not as a site of cultural refinement or civilization but as a little shop of horrors where rape and other forms of violence were routinely visited on black women by their slave masters. Indeed, Thomas Clarke in an *Afro* article entitled, "The People's Forum: Another View of the Black Mammy Question," juxtaposed "this class of Southern white people" Bragg valorized, with some white abolitionists who never owned slaves.⁷ It was these abolitionists, according to Thomas, who were "not addicted to the forcible prostitution of black women or the emasculation of black men."⁸

Based on this information, Bragg may appear to some to have been more of a race traitor than one imbued with a strong racial consciousness. But such a simplistic conclusion is not

⁵ George Freeman Bragg, "Afro Readers Say," *Afro-American*, December 17, 1927, 6, ProQuest.

⁶ George F. Bragg, "The Black Mammy 2," *Afro-American* May 7, 1910, 4, ProQuest.

⁷ George F. Bragg, "The Black Mammy 2," *Afro-American* May 7, 1910, 4, ProQuest.

⁸ Thomas Clarke, "The People's Forum: Another View of the Black Mammy Question," *Afro-American* May 14, 1910, 4, ProQuest.

adequate to encompass the complexity and robust character of Bragg's thought for truly he was also a man of strong racial sympathies throughout his life. This is evidenced by his writings and praxis. Indeed, in 1933, the same year of his participation in the Heyward Shepherd Memorial, Bragg attributed black criminality to wayward white men, segregation, and racism.⁹ In a 1903 *Afro* article Bragg stated that African Americans should rise above Christian denominationalism and unite on the basis of race.¹⁰ On this basis, he castigated black elites and others who did not commit themselves to the black freedom struggle. Bragg also harbored separatist sentiments as evidenced by his separatist ideas in religion and education.

Indeed, the Episcopal Church segregated African American Episcopalians within the denomination by denying them a voice in church polity and leadership roles. Thus, while Bragg and many other African American Episcopalians celebrated the Episcopal Church for its inclusion of African Americans during the antebellum period, such was not done on a basis of racial equality. Indeed, African American Episcopalians were treated like second class citizens in a church they hailed as "catholic" or "universal" which signified "a church for all people, not limited to any period, race or culture . . . This meant that the church was pre-slavery and therefore pre-racism."¹¹ Thus, in an effort to correct such racial disparities and give voice and parity to African American Episcopalians, Bragg, and other black Episcopal clergymen, strenuously advocated for the Missionary District Plan. Under this plan, black bishops would be assigned to lead and preside over the creation of all black districts within the Episcopal Church. Said bishops would also attend

⁹ George F. Bragg Jr. "Toussaint L'Ouverture Quoted in Reply to Dr. Ainslie." *The Sun*, 13 December 1933, ProQuest.

¹⁰ George F. Bragg Jr., "Crummell, Garnet and Payne," *Afro-American* July 11, 1903, ProQuest.

¹¹ J. Carleton Hayden, "Black Episcopal Preaching in the Nineteenth Century: Intellect and Will," *Journal of Religious Thought* 39 (1982): 12.

the General Convention of the Episcopal Church and represent the concerns of black Episcopalians within their respective districts as well as attend to matters of general denominational church polity in concert with white bishops. Correspondingly, white bishops would represent the concerns of white parishioners within their respective districts at the General Episcopal Convention. Thus, the Missionary District Plan, which Bragg vigorously fought to implement for much of his life, was separatist in nature.

Bragg also advocated for black teachers in the Baltimore City Public-School System. Like the Episcopal Church, the public-school system of Baltimore was segregated during the nineteenth century, and only white teachers were allowed to teach black students. This state of affairs was partly based on the racist belief, held by many whites as well as some blacks, that black teachers did not possess the intellectual aptitude of white teachers and were thus inferior.¹² Bragg dismissed such beliefs and argued that there was “a very strong and natural reason why colored teachers should be employed rather than white teachers” to instruct black students.¹³ Indeed for Bragg, black teachers had an almost instinctive cultural connection and rapport with black students that white teachers did not have. Thus, Bragg stated, “White teachers under present environments and social distinctions are confessedly unable to get into the inner and heart life of their colored pupils. There is a great gulf between them which they cannot pass.”¹⁴ He buttressed his point by showing that black people who had been educated by black teachers in Washington, D.C. had bested black people in Baltimore on “competitive

¹² “Colored Teachers: Formation of the Maryland Educational Union by Colored Citizens,” *The Baltimore Sun*, April 6, 1887, ProQuest.

¹³ George F. Bragg Jr., “Letters From the People: The Colored School-Teaching Question,” *Afro American* March 14, 1896, ProQuest.

¹⁴ George F. Bragg Jr., “Letters From the People: The Colored School-Teaching Question,” *Afro American* March 14, 1896, ProQuest.

examinations.” As black people in Baltimore were educated by white teachers, Bragg believed the results of the “competitive examinations” to be “the strongest kind of proof that colored teachers can accomplish better results among their own people than can foreigners.”¹⁵ Hence, he was opposed to “*mixed schools*” and was adamant that his children be taught by black teachers.¹⁶ In truth, his racial consciousness nearly approximated a quasi-form of Black Nationalism.

Based on the foregoing discussion, Bragg was a man who harbored ideas that were in tension with one another. However, for Bragg, such ideas may not have been a matter of tension or contradiction but simply an outgrowth of his personal experience. Inarguably, as a child growing up in St. Petersburg, Virginia Bragg was exposed to images and examples of black power. In 1867 his grandmother Caroline Wiley Bragg with the help of some southern white Episcopalians founded St. Stephens Episcopal Church which was an all-black Episcopal Church. This church was primarily built, staffed and operated by the Bragg family. The first rector of this church was Joseph S. Atwell who was the first black Episcopal priest in Virginia.¹⁷ However, such images existed in tandem with Bragg’s fond memories of some southern ex-Confederates who he claimed were highly refined and friends of the African American community. His writings are full of fond reminiscences and respectful odes to some white Episcopalians and ex-Confederates. In 1936, just four years before his death, Bragg recalled that “ever since [he] was a boy of 8 or 10 years of age, to this very day, he has lived in vital contact and delightful intercourse” with Robert

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Dennis C. Dickerson and the Dictionary of Virginia Biography, “Joseph S. Atwell (1831-1881)” 2 November 2015, *Encyclopedia Virginia: Virginia Humanities*. http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Atwell_Joseph_Sandiford_1831-1881.

E. Lee and former members of his staff.¹⁸ His writings are full of such accolades to white Episcopalians and ex-Confederates he believed were friends of the African American community.

In conclusion, it would seem that Moses's contention that contradiction is an indelible part of critical thought is clearly illustrated in the thought of Bragg. As noted above, Bragg adhered to racist notions of the Lost Cause while simultaneously expressing a strong racial consciousness. The integration of these two divergent ideas in the thought of Bragg may suggest to some that he was a very confused person. But it seems more plausible to assert that he was a product of his environment. For as stated earlier, Bragg was raised in the south and exposed to examples of black power such as his grandmother's desire for a separate black church, staffed by the Bragg family and pastored by the first black Episcopal priest in Virginia. It is highly probable that seeing his family and other African Americans build and staff this church had an indelible impact on his thought. It can be argued that he expanded on this idea later in life with the Missionary District Plan. At the same time Bragg also adhered to aspects of the racist myth of the Lost Cause.

The confluence of these seemingly contradictory ideas in the thought of Bragg have implications and lessons for contemporary society. It suggests that human beings are not monolithic in their thoughts and opinions. Surely, we are not unidimensional beings and therefore may not fit neatly into simplistic ideological categories such as conservative, liberal or radical, or Democrat or Republican. The tension in Bragg's thought should also caution us against creating infallible portraits of those we consider to be moral heroes, political leaders, or religious

¹⁸ George Freeman Bragg, "Letters to the Editor: The Old South and The Negro," *The Sun*, 17 January 1936, 12, ProQuest.

figures. For on close examination of their ideas we might discover opinions and perspectives which do not adhere to our personal code of ethics or those of contemporary civilized society.