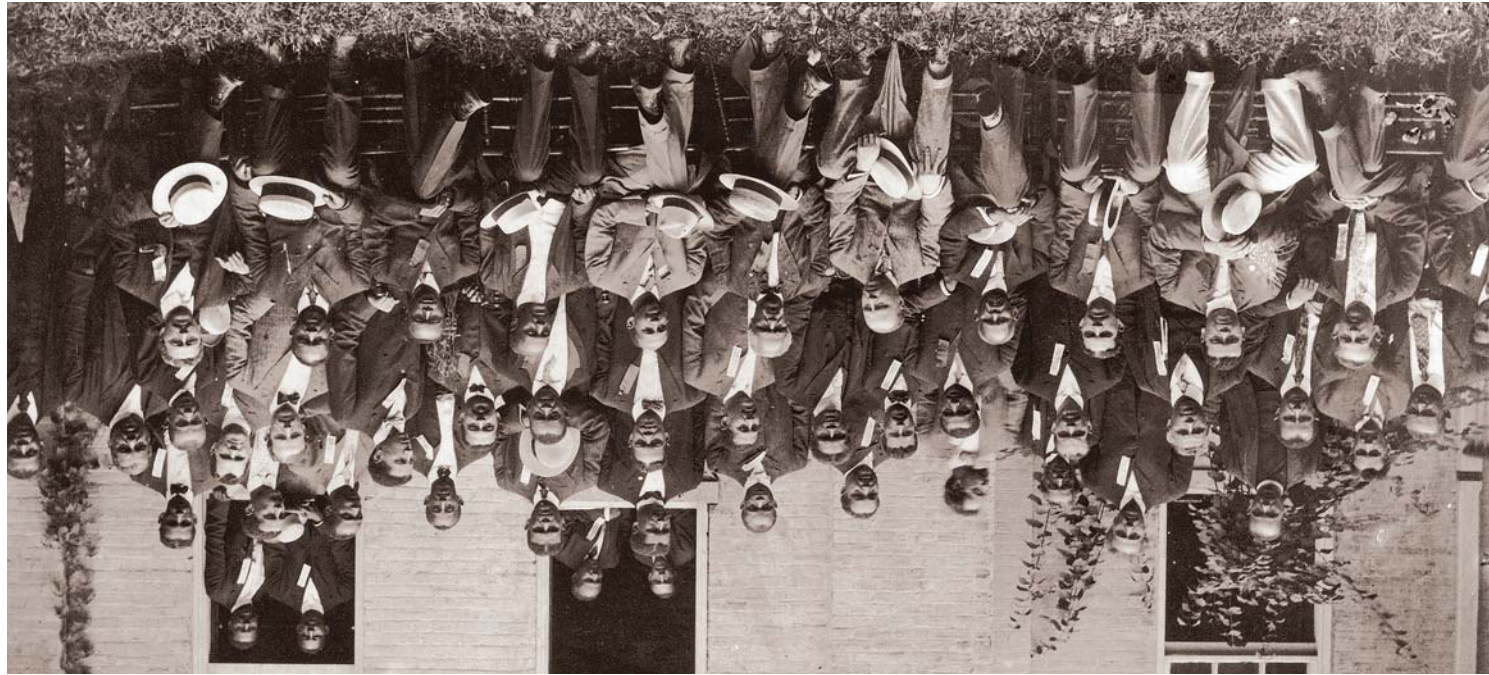


Centennial Commemoration  
August 18, 19, and 20, 2006



## The Cornerstone of the Modern Civil Rights Era: The Niagara Movement at Harpers Ferry



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[www.nps.gov/hafe/niagara](http://www.nps.gov/hafe/niagara)

## The Cornerstone of the Modern Civil Rights Era: The Niagara Movement at Harpers Ferry

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the outlook for full civil rights for African Americans was at a precarious crossroads. Failed Reconstruction, the Supreme Court's separate but equal doctrine (*Plessy v. Ferguson*), coupled with Booker T. Washington's accommodationist policies threatened to compromise any hope for full and equal rights under the law.

Harvard educated William Edward Burghardt Du Bois committed himself to a bolder course, moving well beyond the calculated appeal for limited civil rights. He acted in 1905 by drafting a "Call" to a few select people. The Call had two purposes; "organized determination and aggressive action on the part of men who believed in Negro freedom and growth," and opposition to "present methods of strangling honest criticism."

Du Bois gathered a group of men representing every region of the country except the West. They hoped to meet in Buffalo, New York. When refused accommodation, the members migrated across the border to Canada. Twenty-nine men met at the Erie Beach Hotel in Ontario. The Niagarites adopted a constitution and by-laws, established committees, and wrote the "Declaration of Principles" outlining the future for African Americans. After three days, they returned across the border with a renewed sense of resolve in the struggle for freedom and equality.

Thirteen months later, from August 15-19, 1906, the Niagara Movement held its first public meeting in the United States on the campus of Storer College in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. Harpers Ferry was symbolic for a number of reasons. First and foremost was the connection to John Brown. It was at Harpers Ferry in 1859 that Brown's raid against slavery struck a blow for freedom. Many felt it was John Brown who fired the first shot of the Civil War. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, John Brown's Fort had become a shrine and a symbol of freedom to African Americans, Union soldiers, and the nation's Abolitionists.

Harpers Ferry was also the home of Storer College. Freewill Baptists

opened Storer in 1867 as a mission school to educate former slaves. For twenty-five years Storer was the only school in West Virginia that offered African Americans an education beyond the primary level.

The Niagarites arrived in Harpers Ferry with passion in their hearts and high hopes that their voices would be heard and action would result. They were now more than fifty strong. Women also attended this historic gathering where, on August 17, 1906,



they were granted full and equal membership to the organization.

The week was filled with many inspirational speeches, meetings, special addresses, and commemorative ceremonies. Max Barber, editor of *The Voice of the Negro* said, "A more suitable place for the meeting of the Niagara Movement than Harpers Ferry would have been hard to find. I must confess that I had never yet felt as I felt in Harpers Ferry."

A highlight for those gathered was John Brown's Day. It was a day devoted to honoring the memory of John Brown. At 6 a.m. a silent pilgrimage began to John Brown's Fort. The members removed their shoes and socks as they tread upon the "hallowed ground" where the fort stood. The assemblage then marched single-file around the fort singing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "John Brown's Body."

The inspirational morning was followed by an equally stirring afternoon. The Niagarites listened to Henrietta Leary Evans, whose brother and nephew fought along side Brown at Harpers Ferry, then Lewis Douglass, son of Frederick Douglass, and finally Reverdy C. Ransom, pastor of the Charles Street African Methodist Episcopal Church in Boston. Ransom's speech on John Brown was described as a "masterpiece." The late black scholar, Dr. Benjamin Quarles, called the address, "...the most stirring single episode in the life of the Niagara Movement."

The conference concluded on Sunday, August 19th, with the reading of "An Address to the Country," penned by W.E.B. Du Bois:

*We will not be satisfied to take one jot or tittle less than our full manhood rights. We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a freeborn American, political, civil and social; and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America. The battle we wage is not for ourselves alone but for all true Americans.*

With thunderous applause, the Harpers Ferry conference drew to a close. Years later recalling this conference, Du Bois referred to it as "...one of the greatest meetings that American Negroes ever held."

The Niagara Movement laid the cornerstone of the modern civil rights era. A new movement found a voice. The organization continued until 1911, when almost all of its members became the backbone of the newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). There, the men and women of the Niagara Movement recommitted themselves to the ongoing call for justice and the struggle for equality.

*Above: W.E.B. Du Bois (University of Massachusetts - Amherst). Cover: Delegates to the Second Niagara Movement Conference pose in front of Anthony Hall on the Storer College campus on August 17, 1906 (Harpers Ferry National Historical Park).*



### Youth Discovery Tent

August 18-20, 2006

The weekend will also include programs designed specifically for young people that will help them gain a better understanding of the significance of the Niagara Movement. A *Youth Discovery Tent* will be open throughout the weekend. Those who visit the tent will be able to engage in hands-on activities that will increase their understanding of the African American struggle for freedom and equality. Through art, singing, and debating our next generation of leaders will become more familiar with the 1906 Niagara Movement – the Cornerstone of the Modern Civil Rights Era.

Also featured will be a special traveling exhibit from the Great Blacks in Wax Museum, ongoing related film presentations, and a United States Postal Service commemorative cancellation station.

*Please note that schedule and guests are subject to change.*

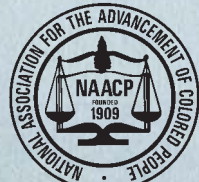
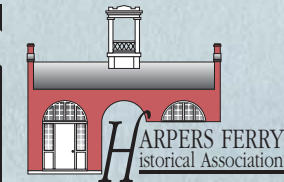
*In addition to the three-day commemoration August 18-20, 2006, the centennial will also include the following:*

### Centennial Curriculum Guide

A curriculum-based Niagara Movement educator guide with lesson plans based on national social studies standards is being developed to span grades K through 12. The kits will initially be available on CD-ROM and will ultimately be available on the Web.

Further information is available at [www.nps.gov/hafe/niagara](http://www.nps.gov/hafe/niagara).

*This publication is funded through a generous grant by the West Virginia Humanities Council.*



*Artwork: "Marching to a Monument for Freedom," by Richard Fitzhugh.*

## The Cornerstone of the Modern Civil Rights Era: The 1906 Niagara Movement at Harpers Ferry

The Niagara Movement, the cornerstone of the modern civil rights movement in America, held its first meeting on American soil in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia in 1906. Why Harpers Ferry? It was a symbol of freedom and a model for progress in the struggles for equality. In August of 2006 Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, the Jefferson County NAACP, the Harpers Ferry Historical Association along with other partners will host the centennial celebration of the Niagara Movement at Harpers Ferry. This commemoration will be held on the same campus that hosted the Niagarites 100 years ago. It will include public commemorative events, an academic symposium, and the introduction of the Niagara Movement Curriculum Guide.

### Centennial Commemoration

August 18-20, 2006

The centennial commemoration will open Friday, August 18 with an evening public reception followed by a gospel concert, opening keynote address and a dramatic presentation on the "Women of the Niagara Movement." Invited guests include the Shiloh Gospel Choir of Washington, D.C., Dr. Julian Bond, and Ms. Donzaleigh Abernathy.

Saturday, August 19 will include a keynote address by two-time Pulitzer Prize winning author, Dr. David Levering Lewis. Other

featured events include musical concerts and an historical reenactment of Niagara member Reverdy C. Ransom's 1906 address, entitled "The Spirit of John Brown." This address is remembered as "The most stirring single episode in the history of the Niagara Movement." A special highlight will be a panel discussion entitled, "The Problem of the Twentieth Century will be the Problem of the Color Line: Breaking Barriers in America." Invited panelists include Dr. Dorothy Height, Mr. Monte Irvin, Mrs. Juanita Abernathy, Dr. Eddie Henderson, Mr. Joseph Wilder, and Congressman John Lewis. This event will be followed by an author signing and reception. The evening will feature a gala concert by the World Famous Count Basie Orchestra, directed by Bill Hughes featuring the debut of Dr. Frank Foster's original musical score for the Niagara Centennial.

On Sunday, August 20, participants will have the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of the men and women of the Niagara Movement as the famous 1906 pilgrimage to the site of John Brown's Fort. Other featured events will be a special address and book signing by Dr. Benjamin Hooks, a conversation with Dr. Du Bois Williams (granddaughter of W. E. B. Du Bois) and a concert by the John Hicks Trio. The day will conclude with guests and visitors posing for the centennial photo.

### Academic Symposium

August 16-18, 2006

The academic symposium entitled, "The Niagara Movement and the Dawning of Twentieth Century Civil Rights," will be held August 16-18, 2006. This conference will be held in the same buildings that hosted the Niagara Movement one hundred years ago and will stimulate unprecedented academic research, scholarship, and debate on the subject of equality. Speakers include Dr. David Levering Lewis, the two-time Pulitzer Prize winning biographer of Niagara founder, W.E.B. Du Bois.

### "J. R. Clifford and the Carrie Williams Case"

August 17, 2006

J.R. Clifford, a leading member of the Niagara Movement, argued a landmark equal education case in the West Virginia courts nearly six decades before the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the Brown decision in 1954. A special historical reenactment of this trial will take place on Thursday August 17, 2006 at 4 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.