

Forrest : Memphis' first White Civil Rights Advocate

Lt. General Nathan Bedford Forrest (1821-1877) was a renowned Southern military leader and strategist during the War Between the States. During the Civil War, Forrest's Confederate cavalry wrecked havoc among Union forces throughout the mid-South. He gained worldwide fame from his many battlefield successes, but the wartime heroics have overshadowed his post-war work as a community leader and civil rights advocate. He fought fiercely on the battlefield, yet was a compassionate man off the field. After the war, Forrest worked tirelessly to build the New South and to promote employment for black Southerners. Forrest was known near and far as a great general, and was a well-respected citizen by both blacks and whites alike. The Independent Order of Pole-Bearers Association (predecessor to the NAACP) was organized by Southern blacks after the war to promote black voting rights, etc. One of their early conventions was held in Memphis and Mr. Forrest was invited to be the guest speaker, the first white man ever to be invited to speak to the Association.

After the Civil War, General Forrest made a speech to the Memphis City Council (then called the Board of Aldermen). In this speech he said that there was no reason that the black man could not be doctors, store clerks, bankers, or any other job equal to whites. They were part of our community and should be involved and employed as such just like anyone else. In another speech to Federal authorities, Forrest said that many of the ex-slaves were skilled artisans and needed to be employed and that those skills needed to be taught to the younger workers. If not, then the next generation of blacks would have no skills and could not succeed and would become dependent on the welfare of society.

Forrest's words went unheeded. The Memphis & Selma Railroad was organized by Forrest after the war to help rebuild the South's transportation and to build the 'new South'. Forrest took it upon

Forrest : Memphis' first White Civil Rights Advocate

himself to hire blacks as architects, construction engineers and foremen, train engineers and conductors, and other high level jobs. In the North, blacks were prohibited from holding such jobs. When the Civil War began, Forrest offered freedom to 44 of his slaves if they would serve with him in the Confederate army. All 44 agreed. One later deserted; the other 43 served faithfully until the end of the war.

Though they had many chances to leave, they chose to remain loyal to the South and to Forrest. Part of General Forrest's command included his own Escort Company, his Green Berets, made up of the very best soldiers available. This unit, which varied in size from 40-90 men, was the elite of the cavalry. Eight of these picked men were black soldiers and all served gallantly and bravely throughout the war. All were armed with at least 2 pistols and a rifle. Most, also carried two additional pistols in saddle holsters. At war's end, when Forrest's cavalry surrendered in May 1865, there were 65 black troopers on the muster roll. Of the soldiers who served under him, Forrest said of the black troops: Finer Confederates never fought.

Forrest was a brilliant cavalryman and courageous soldier. As author Jack Hurst writes: a man possessed of physical valor perhaps unprecedented among his countrymen, as well as, ironically, a man whose social attitudes may well have changed farther in the direction of racial enlightenment over the span of his lifetime than those of most American historical figures.

When Forrest died in 1877 it is noteworthy that his funeral in Memphis was attended not only by a throng of thousands of whites but by hundreds of blacks as well. The funeral procession was over two miles long and was attended by over 10,000 area residents, including 3000 black citizens paying their respects.

Forrest : Memphis' first White Civil Rights Advocate

Forrest's speech to the Independent Order of Pole-Bearers Association July 5, 1875

.A convention and BBQ was held by the Independent Order of Pole-Bearers Association at the fairgrounds of Memphis, five miles east of the city. An invitation to speak was conveyed to General Nathan Bedford Forrest, one of the city's most prominent citizens, and one of the foremost cavalry commanders in the late War Between the States. This was the first invitation granted to a white man to speak at this gathering. The invitation's purpose, one of the leaders said, was to extend peace, joy, and union, and following a brief welcoming address a Miss Lou Lewis, daughter of an officer of the Pole-Bearers, brought forward flowers and assurances that she conveyed them as a token of good will. After Miss Lewis handed him the flowers, General Forrest responded with a short speech that, in the contemporary pages of the Memphis Appeal, evinces Forrest's racial open-mindedness that seemed to have been growing in him.

Ladies and Gentlemen I accept the flowers as a memento of reconciliation between the white and colored races of the southern states. I accept it more particularly as it comes from a colored lady, for if there is any one on God's earth who loves the ladies I believe it is myself. (Immense applause and laughter.) I came here with the jeers of some white people, who think that I am doing wrong. I believe I can exert some influence, and do much to assist the people in strengthening fraternal relations, and shall do all in my power to elevate every man to depress none. (Applause.) I want to elevate you to take positions in law offices, in stores, on farms, and wherever you are capable of going. I have not said anything about politics today. I don't propose to say anything about politics.

Forrest : Memphis' first White Civil Rights Advocate

You have a right to elect whom you please; vote for the man you think best, and I think, when that is done, you and I are freemen. Do as you consider right and honest in electing men for office. I did not come here to make you a long speech, although invited to do so by you. I am not much of a speaker, and my business prevented me from preparing myself. I came to meet you as friends, and welcome you to the white people. I want you to come nearer to us. When I can serve you I will do so. We have but one flag, one country; let us stand together. We may differ in color, but not in sentiment. Many things have been said about me which are wrong, and which white and black persons here, who stood by me through the war, can contradict. Go to work, be industrious, live honestly and act truly, and when you are oppressed I'll come to your relief. I thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for this opportunity you have afforded me to be with you, and to assure you that I am with you in heart and in hand. (Prolonged applause.)

Whereupon N. B. Forrest again thanked Miss Lewis for the bouquet and then gave her a kiss on the cheek. Such a kiss was unheard of in the society of those days, in 1875, but it showed a token of respect and friendship between the general and the black community and did much to promote harmony among the citizens of Memphis.

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