

George Edwin Taylor, First Black Candidate for President - 1904

written by Dan La Botz | August 14, 2024



George Edwin Taylor, the candidate.

This is the first of a series of articles about Black political candidates for the two highest offices of president and vice-president of the United States. The idea of writing this series originally begun when Cornel West announced his candidacy, the story of Black political candidates for the highest offices take on a new significance in light of Kamala Harris' current campaign. This is the list of candidates that we discuss in this series, though the four candidates of 1968 are discussed in one article.

- **George Edwin Taylor**, candidate of the National Negro Liberty Party, sometimes known as the National Liberty Party in 1904;
- **Clifton Berry**, of the Socialist Workers Party in 1964;
- **Charlene Mitchell** of the Communist Party in 1968;
- **Eldridge Cleaver** with the Peace & Freedom Party in 1968;
- **Dick Gregory** as a write-in candidate in 1968;
- **Channing Emery Phillips** as a Democrat, all in 1968.
- **Shirley Chisholm**, Democrat, in 1972;
- **Angela Davis**, Communist Party for vice-president in 1984 and 1988;
- **Jesse Jackson**, Democrat, for president in 1984 and 1988;
- **Ron Daniels**, People's Party candidate in 1992;
- **Cynthia McKinney**, Green Party candidate 2008;
- **Cornel West**, independent, in 2024;
- **Barack Obama**, Democratic candidate in 2008 and 2012;
- and finally **Kamala Harris** for vice president in 2020 for president in 2024.

George Edwin Taylor for President - 1904

George Edwin Taylor was the first African American candidate for president running in 1904 as the nominee of the National Negro Liberty Party. His father an enslaved man and his mother a free Black woman. Orphaned as a small child, Taylor led a life of extraordinary resilience, ambition, and achievement made possible by charity and solidarity of the Black people who cared for, raised, and educated him and by the initially racially tolerant attitudes of his hometown of La Crosse. The vast

labor upheaval of the 1880s and Black populism capitulated him into politics and gave him his political program of workers power and Black civil rights. Almost completely unknown since the 1900s, he was rediscovered by historian Bruce L. Mouser and made known to the world when he published his book *For Labor, Race, and Liberty: George Edwin Taylor, His Historic Run for the White House, and the Making of Independent Black Politics* published in 2011. I based this essay almost entirely on Mouser's book.

Birth, Childhood, and Youth

George Edwin Taylor was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, a slave state, on August 4, 1857, the son of Nathaniel or Bryant Taylor, an enslaved man and Amanda Hines, a free Black woman. His status as slave or free was unclear, because while some states said the mother's status determined the child's, in others it followed the status of the father. Two years after baby George's birth, Arkansas passed the Free Negro Expulsion Act, ordering all free Black people to leave the state—there were about 700 at the time—or if they failed to leave to be hired out or enslaved and sold. Anxious to see that her child remained free, Amanda Hines fled the state.

Hines went to Alton, Illinois, a free state, where she was befriended by the abolitionists Owen and Joseph Lovejoy, conductors on the Underground Railroad, who helped escaped slaves move north on a trail paralleling the Mississippi River. But Hines died of tuberculosis in 1861 or 62 when George was only four or five years old. He became a waif who wandered around the city of Alton and slept among shipping crates in the warehouses, apparently supported by handouts from the townspeople. In 1865 at the age of seven he boarded the *Hawkeye State*, a sidewheel steamship, and several days later disembarked at La Crosse, Wisconsin. Members of the small Black community there took care of George. Albert Burt, a cook on the riverboat, and his wife Elizabeth took care of George for a while but then passed him on to another cook Henry Schooley and his white wife Anna Southall. When that family left the city, George stayed on in La Crosse for a while but was then taken in by the family of a Black farmer named Nathan Smith who lived outside of La Crosse. He, Smith, who took in other orphans as well, was the only Black person recorded in La Crosse in the census of 1870. Taylor, except for his years in boarding school, stayed with Smith until he was twenty.

In both La Crosse and out on the farm, George attended public schools, but when he was a teenager, Smith sent George to study at Wayland Academy, a coeducational boarding school in Beaver Dam where he studied from 1877 to 1879. The school offered courses in English with an emphasis on oratory and debate and a classical curriculum in Greek and Latin, and George took the latter track, though after two years because of health issues and financial problems, he had to drop out and return to the farm.

Into the Newspaper Business and Labor Politics

So, in 1879, now twenty-two years old, George Taylor returned to La Crosse where he found work with the notorious newspaper publisher Matt "Brick" Pomeroy. A Democratic Party copperhead and fierce opponent of the Republican Party, Pomeroy published newspapers in several cities but eventually settled in La Crosse where he became a populist who sided with the working class. Taylor worked on Pomeroy's *Democrat* first as a printer's devil, that is, an apprentice, learning the newspaper business. The late 1870s and 1880 were a time of tremendous labor agitation with the growth of the Knights of Labor and strikes by railroad workers, brewers, lumberjacks, and other trades, and Taylor's biographer believes that the young Black apprentice wrote some of the paper's unsigned editorial supporting them.

Taylor moved on to work at Dr. Frank Powell's *Evening Star* another paper with a pro-labor stand. When a few years later the incumbent La Crosse mayor decided not to run for reelection, surprising

both the Republicans and Democrats, Powell decided to throw his hat into the ring, running as an independent. Powell chose Taylor to be editor as his newspaper effectively became his campaign's publication and consequently Taylor learned not only editing skills, but also the art of political propaganda and agitation. Powell won election and when his second term election arrived, he advocated the formation of a labor party.

The White Beaver Assembly of the Knights of Labor met in 1885 and some 700 workers and farmers established the Workingmen's Party of La Crosse, backing Powell. George Taylor became the party's committeeman in the second ward and he was chosen to serve on the party's executive committee and spoke to party meetings. He was referred to as "the brains of *The Star* and served as Powell's campaign manager. Powell won this second election and became mayor just as the Knights of Labor was leading strikes for the eight-hour day in Milwaukee and other cities in Wisconsin, a movement spread throughout the Midwest from Minneapolis to Chicago, a movement supported by Powell who was charged with incitement to riot. Powell then announced he would be a candidate for governor and the La Crosse party, now named the Workers and Farmers Party, called for a state convention to be held in La Crosse to form a new statewide party.

The La Crosse Workers and Farmers Party Convention, with some 114 delegates in attendance, was completely overwhelmed by the delegates from the much larger city of Milwaukee who opposed deciding on a slate of candidates for the state elections. Powell then announced that he would run as an independent and Taylor likely authored the party's program that took up and gave articulate expression to all of the major working-class issues of the day, from wages to tax policies. While it raised no particular demands of the Black citizens, it did call for equal rights for all. The program ended with the words:

Resolved: We favor law and order and condemn all officials, anarchists, and communists who seek to advance their interests in violation of the rights of man to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

How odd, but not really. Since the Paris Commune of 1871 and the great railroad strike of 1877 politicians, businessmen, and conservative newspapers had referred to militant workers as anarchists or communists.

Taylor was chosen as a member of the party's temporary state central committee and took on the key role as the committee's secretary. It was decided that the party would convene another convention in Neenah, Wisconsin in September.

With financial backing from Powell, Taylor established a new weekly newspaper, the *Wisconsin Labor Advocate*. In the inaugural editorial, Taylor proclaimed that the Republicans and Democrats had become controlled by the few as workers were being "reduced to a condition but little better than slavery," and that his paper would be the voice of workingmen and whatever new party they created. His paper, speaking to workers, also announced that Susan B. Anthony had formed the Women's National Association and that the Prohibition Party had nominated Charles Alexander of Eau Claire for governor. Yet Taylor hardly discussed race issues or the condition of Black people either locally or nationally and when he did his articles often suggest that Blacks were backward.

At the Neenah convention, the Milwaukee Knights of Labor dominated, the party's name was changed to People's Party of Wisconsin, and Greenbacker John Cochrane won the nomination for governor over Powell, who declined to become the candidate for lieutenant governor. But Powell was elected to the party's executive board and as a delegate to a coming convention of the National

People's Party in Cincinnati meant to bring together all of the small minor parties around the country. Taylor's *Advocate* became the paper of the new party and published its pro-labor platform.

Swimming Against the Stream

In the 1886 election, Wisconsin voters failed to turn out enthusiastically for the People's Party and many split their tickets voting for Democrats for some offices, and so the Republicans won almost everywhere, though one People's Party candidate was elected to Congress. Undeterred by the electoral defeat, Powell and Taylor were off to the National People's Party convention held in Cincinnati, there were hundreds of delegates from the Knights of Labor, from the Agricultural Wheel and the Grange, Greenbackers, "colored" men, suffragists, met and established yet another new party, United Labor. The new party developed a platform that reflected this coalition's diverse interests. Taylor returned to La Crosse to organize for the movement locally.

The labor movement, however, had begun to retreat. The Haymarket Affair in Chicago on May 1, 1886—a confrontation between police and workers in which seven police and four workers were killed, leading to the indictment of 31 workers in which eight were accused of being accessories to murder and seven sentence to death by hanging—signaled the end of period of winning strikes and labor parties. In Wisconsin the United Labor Party went down to defeat. Taylor, who had become involved in a fight between his patron Frank Powell and his brother George Powell who was also involved in politics, found himself without the patronage that had helped support his printing and newspaper business. And at the same time factionalism in the White Beaver Knight of Labor left him bereft of union support. The Union Labor Party dropped Taylor from the executive committee.

Racial justice was also being set back. In 1883, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875. The 1880s were also the years in which the Reconstruction of the South was halted and Jim Crow established, meaning racial segregation and disfranchisement. The region's Black share-cropping peasantry was driven into debt peonage and the Black population subjugated by fear and violence. There were hundreds of lynchings in that period, principally of Black people. At the same time, in the Northeast and the Midwest, racial segregation increased, racial discrimination spread in housing, school, public accommodations, and employment, and racist attitudes hardened.

In La Crosse, Taylor wrote that his opponent had begun to play the race card, or as he put it the "black hand" against him. He was now openly referred to as the "dusky" editor and one newspaper editor referred to him as "the descendant of the cannibal race." In July of 1887, burglars robbed Taylor's house and office, stealing his paper's subscriber list. In August, his *Wisconsin Labor Advocate* ceased publication. As he had done for some time, Taylor continued to lecture to working-class and Black audiences on labor issues to earn a few dollars. But he was failing financially. And he had failed politically. Taylor now had to rethink everything and he transitioned from labor advocate to Black populist, perhaps motivated in part by the racism he had experienced for the first time in his hometown.

A New Beginning in Iowa as a Black Activist

We know nothing of the next few years, though he reportedly "traveled west," whatever that means. In January of 1901 he moved to Oskaloosa, in the Southeastern corner of Iowa, where there was a sizable African American population, some involved in mining and meatpacking. Taylor declared himself a Republican, the party of the vast majority of Blacks, and set to work. He succeeded in getting selected to be one of Iowa's five delegates to the Republican National Convention scheduled to meet in Minneapolis, June 7-10, 1892 and about the same time was elected president of the National Colored Negro Men's Protective Association (NCMPA).

At the convention he joined a caucus of Black delegates pushing a militant Black agenda within the national party and joined Frederick Douglass and Charles Ferguson in presenting the caucus' proposal to the platform committee—though the national committee incorporated none of their proposals. Taylor had favored William McKinley of Ohio to be the party's nominee, but that failed too. So, Taylor left the party because it had rejected the Black delegates program and then wrote a broadside attacking the party.

His manifesto, "A National Appeal," published in 1892, asked, "Can we wait three centuries longer for the time of grace for the states and territories of the United States to learn that we are human beings—American citizens." He praised Abraham Lincoln for freeing the Black people but criticized the Republican Party which during the last 27 years for failing to deliver on the promises of citizenship. He wrote "10,091 Negroes have been shot down like dogs, skinned alive, hung to trees, or burned at stakes without the interference of the federal government only in one instance. But we are told to wait." He criticized both parties for failing to protect Black people and their rights and concluded writing,

We appeal to the lovers of liberty everywhere, and to the American people especially, in whom we still have faith, to assist us in peacefully securing what the law of the land, as well as the divine law of God already accord us: *Equality before the law, protection to our lives.*

The NCMPPA meeting in Indianapolis on September 22 and 23, 1892 endorsed Taylor's appeal.

The NCMPPA convention in Chicago, June 26-27, proposed joining with Black organizations throughout the country. The convention elected Taylor as its president, providing him an opportunity to interact with upper- and middle-class urban Black intellectuals including some from England's anti-imperialist movement. The convention condemned lynching, disfranchisement, and the Jim Crow system, as well as debating the annexation of Hawaii. Taylor proposed the "negro colonization" of the United States, that is the establishment of Black settlements throughout the country, in order to improve the situation of Black Americans. Taylor traveled to the South in 1894, at a time when Black populists in alliance with the Republican Party were growing. Yet, following the convention, virtually nothing was done to implement its plan for founding a new national Black movement. The organization, which changed its name to the Colored Peoples National Protective Association, then closed down in 1900. Several other national Black reform organizations also foundered. Frederick Douglass had died in 1895, and Booker T. Washington had captured the attention of Blacks and won support from white philanthropists with his message of Black self-improvement and accommodation to the South's system of segregation.

Locally, Taylor worked through the Afro-American League of Iowa, and he became the group's "statistician" reporting on the conditions of the Black population and Black workers in particular. Taylor was also back in the newspaper business having revived a small local paper. But a rival Black activist claimed that Taylor had said that the Republican Party had bought up the Black church leaders, that he had referred to anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells as a "young, Afro-American adventuress, that he had supported some white candidates over Black ones, and that Taylor had sponsored a train trip where beer was served and there were crap games. Whatever the truth of the allegations, they damaged his reputation, at least briefly. But Taylor weathered the storm and continued to speak at Emancipation Day celebrations, to chair lodge meetings of the Knights of Pythias (Colored), and he became involved in a Black cooperative business.



George Edwin Taylor

Into the Democratic Party

Frederick Douglass when he was the most prominent Black leader had once said, “The Republican Party is the deck, all the rest is the sea.” Republican Party leaders Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant had fought for the liberation of the slaves during the Civil War and had protected them and their civil rights during Reconstruction. But in the 1880s and 1890s, after the overthrow of Reconstruction, some Blacks had turned to independent politics or even to the Democratic Party. The Republicans in the Gilded Age had become the party of big business, while in the Northeast and the Midwest the Democrats often championed labor’s causes, so it was not unreasonable that Taylor would now turn to the Democrats. After 1892, Taylor became an enthusiastic Democrat and campaigned for Grover Cleveland and his running mate Adlai I. Stevenson.

In a “National Appel to the Negro,” joining Black and labor concerns, he argued that to fulfill the ideals of Lincoln one had to for support the Democratic Party that in the struggle between capital represented the common man. “We now have the new man, the new woman, the political methods, the new republicanism, the new Democracy.” Taylor had at this time also become vice-president of the Negro National Free Silver League of America, convinced that easy money would help workers and the poor white and Black, and so he supported, Democrat William Jennings Bryant, a populist who campaigned on the issue of “free silver coinage—plentiful money. But Bryant was defeated by Cleveland in 1896, a defeat for the Democratic Party and for the populist movement of white and Black farmers.

Taylor now became president of the National Negro Democratic League (NNDL), which served as the Negro bureau of the Democratic Party—this at a time when the Democrats were supporting “states’ rights” and “separate but equal.” But some Democrats together with some Republicans were also involved in the anti-imperialist leagues that arose to protest the Spanish-American war and the taking of the Philippines and Puerto Rico and the protectorate over Cuba. Some Black activists formed an “Anti-expansion, Anti-imperialist, Anti-trust, and Anti-lynching League,” with Taylor as one of its 22-member executive committee. He traveled to the North and East speaking for the cause, sometimes sharing the stage with Booker T. Washington.

In August of 1894, Taylor married Cora E. Cooper Buckner, a well-educated woman fifteen years young then him. She became the coeditor of Taylor’s weekly *The Negro Solicitor*, taking responsibility for writing and editing during his absences on speaking tours. In his paper, Taylor criticized the Democratic Party for its failure to protect Black voting and civil rights, and some in the party turned against him. The populist movement was also in decline, and Taylor was forced to cease publication in 1898. Continuing to travel and speak for the movement, he now supported himself by free-lance writing for a variety of papers in the state and throughout the Midwest. Still, Taylor was

elected president of the NNDL In 1900, though the organization was divided by a faction fight between Taylor and the man he had defeated, Frederick L. McGhee. Meanwhile, Bryant's second defeat for the U.S. presidency in 1900 disappointed and demoralized Black populists, including Taylor.

The National Negro Liberty Party Chooses Taylor

Taylor largely faded from journalism, polemics, and politics for a period. He served as a Justice of the Peace for a couple of years in the farming and coal mining town of Hilton. He bought a farm and raised crops and livestock for three years, traveled and lectured, and wrote articles, and having long suffered from respiratory problems, he went to Ottumwa for medical treatment. In this period, he separated from his wife Cora. Once again, he paused to reconsider the nature of the period, the political possibilities, and his own future.



George Edwin Taylor
in 1908

In 1904 the National Negro Liberty Party had chosen William T. Scott, a man whose career in Black politics resembled Taylor's and even intersected it at various points. But then it had come to light that Scott had been arrested and convicted eight years before for operating "a disorderly house," that is an illegal business engaged in prostitution or gambling. So, the executive committee of the party rescinded his nomination and in July chose Taylor, who resigned from the Democratic Party and accepted the nomination, while at the same time he gave up the presidency of the NNDL In August the party confirmed Taylor as the candidate and adopted a platform demanding Black voting and civil rights, freedom for the Philippines, and an end to the "anarchy of lynching.". Given his involvement in the party's Black caucus and his criticism of the Democrats, his willingness to run was not a surprising move. Still, it was a courageous decision because he was burning his bridges to both major political parties.

Taylor knew from the beginning that he could not win the election. He declared it was an "educational campaign" and that he expected to campaign in about a dozen states. He was campaigning at a time when both parties opposed any new civil rights bill as did president Theodore Roosevelt. Even educated Black people in the North looked down on and ridiculed their brethren, the former slaves and descendants of slaves in the South. He was the candidate of an all-Black party that called for pensions for former slaves, a demand almost universally derided. Relying almost entirely on himself, Taylor drafted a statement explaining the party program and sent it to papers

round the country. The platform called for pensions for ex-slaves, independence for Puerto Ricans and Filipinos, representation for voters in the District of Columbia, and of course condemned the disfranchisement efforts then sweeping the South.

National Negro Liberty Party Program:

- Universal suffrage regardless of race
- Federal protection of the rights of all citizens
- Federal anti-lynching laws
- Additional black regiments in the U.S. Army
- Federal pensions for all former slaves
- Government ownership and control of all public services to ensure equal accommodations for all citizens
- Home rule for the District of Columbia

The National Negro Liberty Party leadership claimed to be organizing in every state and to be working to get the party and Taylor's name on the ballots. But the circulation of nominating petitions was costly, involving thousands of dollars, and various rules and regulations complicated the process. The electoral system was designed to exclude minor third parties. Even in Iowa where he was well known, Taylor couldn't get his name on the ballot. And the campaign was distracted by newspaper accounts of the rearrest of Scott for failing to pay the fine he owed.

Booker T. Washington, who was extremely influential with the Black press, opposed all third parties, including Taylor's, as threatening Black support from the two major parties. Taylor's former colleagues in the Democratic Party would not support him and Republicans accused the National Negro Liberty Party of being paid for by the Democrats to take votes from the Republicans. So, on November 8, 1904, Taylor received only a few thousand write-in votes. He had expected to lose, but perhaps not to have so little support.



George Edwin Taylor in later life.

Out of the Fray

Taylor had made the good fight but had been defeated, ending his political career, in 1910 he moved to Florida, married Marion M. Tillinghast, and worked at a variety of jobs, some in the newspaper businesses. In 1922 he was a cofounder of a Masonic organization, the Progressive Order of Men and Women. Three years later he was found dead in his house on Duval Street in Jacksonville, and at his funeral he was reportedly mourned by citizens of all walks of life.

Taylor's life embodied the difficulties faced by Black people in his times: the flight from slavery, the destruction of families, the extreme poverty. Yet thanks to the solidarity and charity of other Black people, he got a superior education and achieved a career in journalism and in politics. He had in his career, made some mistakes, suffered some defeats and even humiliations. But in his time and in his heyday, Taylor represented an independent, working-class, Black politics that arose from his experience with the labor movement and Black organization. His biographer Bruce Mouser

summarizes Taylor's mature political positions:

He supported an eight-hour workday, equal pay for equal work, safe working conditions, a graduated income tax, public ownership of railroads, cheap money, free trade, voting rights for the District of Columbia, and pensions for impoverished and landless ex-slaves who had received no wages in slavery time—all issues that fundamentally separated him from those championed by his urban colleagues. He encouraged the development of economic cooperatives to provide capital for small owners. He called for an increase in the number of black officers in the military and proportionate patronage in government services. He opposed imperialism in all its forms. He believed that blacks could be power brokers in national politics, and he was convinced that it was possible to use voting numbers as leverage to protect civil rights and changes in the platforms of established parties and the actions of politicians.

But it wasn't only his program but also his method that was important. As Mouser writes, "He championed the laboring masses and grassroots organizing style, while leaders in emerging and educated urban black communities were advocating a top-down leadership model." His commitment to rank-and-file, bottom-up organizing were admirable at the time and still valuable in contemporary politics a century later.

It would be almost sixty years before there was another Black presidential candidate for president.

Sources:

Bruce L. Mouser, *For Labor, Race, and Liberty: George Edwin Taylor, His Historic Run for the White House, and the Making of Independent Black Politics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011.

Association for the Study of African American Life and History (AAHIA) Episode #37 - "The Story of the First African American U.S. Presidential Candidate".