

U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd

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Byrd Honors Niagara Movement at Harpers Ferry

The Niagara Movement changed the course of history, said U.S. Senator Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., at the group's centennial opening ceremony Thursday at the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.

The Niagara Movement was founded in 1905 by a group of courageous and determined African-Americans. The group's 1906 meeting, the first on American soil, was held on the campus of Storer College, now part of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. The Niagara Movement served as the foundation for the NAACP.

Senator Byrd's remarks at the event are below.

It was in August of 1906 at the now closed Storer College, an historically black educational institution, here in Harpers Ferry, that members of the Niagara Movement held their first meeting on American soil. The men and women who participated in this second conference of African-Americans met to discuss the state of affairs for African-Americans nationwide. They were alarmed and distressed to observe and experience the erosion of the political and civil rights of African-Americans that continued to take place commencing with the end of the Reconstruction. Also of growing concern was the marked increase in instances of mob violence visited on African-Americans, the ever-growing legal and social practices limiting economic and educational opportunities, and finally, the narrowing of opportunities to seek redress or remedy through the courts to end segregation and other discriminatory practices.

The courageous and determined men and women of the Niagara Movement gathered to register their protest of such treatment and to make known their intention to be vigilant in their efforts to contest any legal action or practice designed to assign them status as second-class citizens. They made claim to their birthright as citizens of this country, and wished to remind the nation of their right to full citizenship as outlined in the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution. The individuals of the Niagara Movement resolved that they would demand their rights and freedoms as American citizens. Despite seemingly overwhelming odds, these stalwart individuals made a commitment to press on. That commitment and determination are a testament to what a few individuals motivated by passion and faith can achieve. Mountains can be moved. Prejudice can be overcome and the course of history can be changed. Because of their faith in God and their belief in the high ideals on which this nation was founded, right prevailed in the end.