

Reverend Thomas Oscar Fuller

1867-1942

Thomas Oscar Fuller was born of former slave parents two years after the end of the Civil War. He was born in Franklinton, Franklin County, North Carolina. He was the last of fourteen children and was the only child born to J. Henderson and Mary Eliza Fuller after his father bought the family's freedom a few years before the Emancipation Proclamation granted freedom to all slaves. His father was a carpenter and wheelwright and built many homes in Franklin and adjacent Counties. T. O. Fuller spoke of his parents as "old time christians, of deep piety, and consecrated common sense."

He was an educated man, having begun his studies at the normal school in Franklinton at the age of five. In 1885, he entered Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C., and received an A.B. in 1890. He was ordained into the ministry in the Spring of 1893 and, later that year, received his M.A. from Shaw University. He also received his D.D. from the same university and, in 1906, an honorary Ph.D. from A&M College (now Alabama A&M University) in Normal, AL.

While still in North Carolina, he taught in rural schools, farmed, and pastored several rural churches. He established a colored grade school at his home in Franklin County and a girls seminary in Franklinton. The latter was chartered as the Girls Training School in Franklinton by an act of the North Carolina General Assembly in 1895. From 1895 until his election to the State Senate in 1898, Dr. Fuller served as principal at Shiloh Institute in Warrenton. His integration of academics with the moral teachings of religion was central to his work as a educator and was to continue

throughout his long career.

For two years, 1898-1899, Dr. Fuller served as the only black in the Legislature of North Carolina. His election as the State Senator representing the Eleventh District, Warren and Vance Counties, was virtually unopposed but led to the Wilmington Riots of 1898. As late as 1933, Dr. Fuller was the only black since Reconstruction to serve as a Legislator in any of the southern states. The racial reaction to his election and his dealing with it promoted a sensitivity to white opinion. As a Legislator, he gained a reputation as a man of keen insight and as an orator.

He was called to Memphis in 1900 to pastor the First Baptist Church (Negro) which met in the Zion Hall on Beale Street. Property for a new church at the corner of Wellington Street and Frazer Avenue (now St. Paul Avenue) had been purchased by the previous pastor, Dr. W. S. Ellington. Under the leadership of Dr. Fuller, the building was dedicated in 1906 and remained in use until 1939 when it was demolished after the land was acquired by the City of Memphis for the construction of the William H. Foote Housing Project. The congregation moved to the present location at 682 South Lauderdale Street. This new building incorporated a large brick home as the educational section at the rear of the chapel. The new chapel incorporated bricks, stained-glass windows, and other fixtures and materials from the St. Paul Avenue church. Dr. Fuller served as pastor of the First Baptist Church (Lauderdale) until the morning of his death, June 21, 1942.

Dr. Fuller served as president, principal, and teacher at the Howe Institute, later Howe College, located across the street from the St. Paul Avenue church. Howe Institute had been founded in 1888 as Memphis Baptist Bible and Normal Institute for West Tennessee Baptists but, by 1890, was known as Memphis Baptist Bible, Normal, and Industrial Institute; the Baptist University of West Tennessee, North Mississippi, and East Arkansas.

It was the second such school for Negroes in Memphis; LeMoyne Normal Institute had been established in 1871 with an endowment from Dr. F. Julius LeMoyne of Washington, Pennsylvania.

Originally an elementary and secondary school for Negroes, Howe Institute was founded and funded by Peter and Clara Howe in cooperation with several local black ministers. The Howes were missionaries from Illinois and were "assassinated" before the school buildings were completed. In 1902, the principal of the school resigned and Dr. Fuller was asked to continue his work. Dr. Fuller's shrewd handling of the school's publicity, which emphasized the vocational and religious aspects of the curriculum while neglecting to mention that Greek, psychology, and four years of Latin were included in the more scholarly academic program, gained both private and government support for the institute.

When Roger Williams College, the Tennessee Negro Baptist College in Nashville, was closed in 1929, efforts were made to assemble the assets of both institutions as a single school in Memphis. The Home Mission Board of the American Baptist Convention had secured an option for a thirty-acre site at the southeast corner of Bellevue and South Parkway. A large white playground across the Parkway from this lot was the site of baseball games which attracted huge crowds. Opposition by the owners of white social clubs, a few politicians, and visitors to the playground prevented the goal from being realized though it had support from both the black and white communities of Memphis and an endowment of a half-million dollars.

Howe-Roger Williams College was established on the site of the Howe Institute/College. The school succumbed to a combination of financial, political, and racial pressure and closed in 1935 when that property and that of the First Baptist Church (Negro) was purchased for the William H.

Foote Housing Project.

Rev. Fuller was known as the dean of the Negro ministers of Memphis. He organized the Baptist Ministers Alliance of Memphis that met every Tuesday at his church for many years. He was a member of the executive committee of the Baptist World Alliance. He was secretary of the National Baptist Convention of the U.S.A. for over twenty-five years and was also their director of publicity. He was a preacher, teacher, poet, author and philosopher, and a leading and recognized spokesman for the Negro community and Baptist church locally, nationally, and internationally.

Among his books are: Bright Lights in Memory's Hall, History of Negro Baptists in Memphis, Ten Points on Church Membership, The Story of Church Life Among Negroes, Twenty Years in Public Life: 1890-1910 (1920; a collection of autobiographical essays), Flashes and Gems of Thought and Eloquence (1920), Banks and Banking (1920), Pictorial History of the American Negro (1933), History of the Negro Baptists of Tennessee (1936), Bridging the Racial Chasms (1937), Story of Negro Church Life in Memphis (1938), and Notes on Parliamentary Law (1940).

At the time of his death, Dr. Fuller had been working for several years to collect and organize a museum of Negro history. He had hoped that the museum would be opened in a building in LeMoyné Gardens but was never completed. One of his last public acts was to preside at the dedication and opening of Shelby Bluffs State Park for Negroes, now T. O. Fuller State Park.

Dr. Fuller tried to secure needed help for the colored race without antagonizing the whites. Throughout his life, he endured many struggles and hardships but was never militant. He expressed and demonstrated a sensitivity and understanding of the white race. He had white friends of all echelons in this city as he strived to fulfill the needs of his race in

its struggles within the community.

"Next to Dr. Booker Washington, Dr. T. O. Fuller
is the leading apostle of peace among the colored
leaders of the South."

The Bright Side of Memphis
G. P. Hamilton (1908)