O.V. Catto and America’s Civil Rights Heritage

Speech given at Catto Memorial Dedication, September 26, 2017
by V. Chapman-Smith

Good Morning!

One of the important benefits of historical perspective is that it allows one to put a broader lens on events and the contributions of individuals. History looks at change over time and not just a single event at the moment. It helps us to understand, why events and individuals matter. This long lens is most important now when considering Octavius V. Catto and what he means to Americans. Monuments are not neutral, passive or accidental... They carry great meaning. With this broader lens, I can emphatically say that Catto is truly among our City’s pantheon of “greats” and is one of our nation’s important citizens, who worked to the good of America.

During his time, Catto was seen as “the most magnetic and promising leader that the Philadelphia black community had yet produced.” His death during an election riot aimed to suppress the black vote in 1871 was tragic loss to his family and friends, the African American community in our City, and a host of colleagues and allies beyond the black community here. It was a great loss to his white allies, particularly Gen. Louis Wagner, who orchestrated Catto's large public funeral down Broad Street.

Nationally, Catto's death was tragic loss to the network of black leaders he worked with. This network included other “greats”...Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, William Still and James Mercer Langston. One can only image what Catto would have further contributed, if he lived.

But what is important for us to know today is ...when looking at his life and achievements through the lens of history is that Catto’s contributions are even larger and more significant than how they were seen at the time of his death. And, it is this magnification which makes the dedication of this memorial today even more consequential.

Catto’s life and legacy tells us how our young people and community are critical to effecting social change. Catto was around 16 years old when he started “Speaking Up”. He and his family arrived in Philadelphia in 1848 to a dynamic and politically active free black community that has already built many founding institutions, among them St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Mother Bethel, the Free African Society and the First African Presbyterian Church, where his father would serve as minister. Years later, Catto would join St. Thomas and serve as vestryman.

Catto was truly shaped and educated by his family and his family’s adopted home, Philadelphia. William T. Catto instilled in his children a sense of honor, responsibility and service to others. Building on this family foundation, it is here in Philly that Catto received one of the finest educations afforded to African Americans at the time...attending the private school - Institute for Colored Youth (ICY) that had both a rigorous academic curriculum and gave its students exposure to the important issues of the day with visiting leading thinkers, activists, and politicians. There Catto’s mind was shaped by two great
principals, Charles Reason and Ebenezer Bassett, and where he built friendships with two other young people who were part of his crusades, among these was Jacob White, Jr. and Caroline LeCount, both became the first African American principals of black public schools. And, it is also at ICY where he became a colleague of great women educators like Fannie Jackson and Sara Mapps Douglass.

Philadelphia empowered Catto at an early age. His family and community encouraged him and other youth to “Speak Up” their views and take on civic responsibilities. As a young man, Catto strengthened this community through his efforts to desegregate public transportation and his recruitment of black troops…the United States Colored Troops for the Civil War, as an educator he trained students who eventually served as teachers in much needed public schools for blacks, and in his dying effort he worked to galvanize the black vote, so black men would have a voice in shaping the politics of our City and nation.

Catto knew how to form alliances that helped him and others achieve the results they sought. This is especially in his work with the founders of the Union League among them Morton McMichael, Henry Boker and Congressman William Kelley. It was through such alliances that Catto, Frederick Douglas, Robert Forten and others were able to build success and gain passage of key legislation.

And, although some today considered Catto a “Forgotten Hero”, he was indeed continually remembered in many circles in the black community both by individuals and in a number of organizations including the OV Catto Elk Lodge and St. Thomas Church. Part of his story is held in the archives of several of our premier cultural institutions.

At the time of his death Catto was known as an extraordinary orator, scholar, and educator. What people did not know then is what would be the long tenacles of his accomplishments. They did not know that Cheyney University would become a collegiate level education institution, training hundreds of educators and including civil rights activists like Baynard Rustin, the “brain child” behind the “March on Washington”.

They did not know that the Pythian Base Ball club, even though it dissolved after his death, that its name would be resurrected in the National Negro Baseball League and represent in the Baseball Hall of Fame (in Cooperstown) the early efforts of black efforts to desegregate baseball. What they did not know is that Catto’s work in establishing public schools for Freedmen and free blacks in Washington, D.C. would produce the most prestigious black public high school in our nation by the end of the 19th Century that gave us such accomplished graduates as our own Sadie Tanner Alexander (granddaughter of Catto’s friend, Benjamin Tanner), Charles Hamilton Houston (known as the man who “Killed Jim Crow” and law professor and mentor to Thurgood Marshall), and would provide faculty positions for people like Carter G. Wilson, the Father of Black History, who was born 4 years after Catto’s death.

Most significantly is that at the time of his death, they did not realize that his greatest contribution to our nation would come from his national work in ratifying the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to our U.S. Constitution. (This is only something that we are truly understanding now, because we have the vantage of hindsight.) Catto was Philadelphia’s stand bearer in this effort for Constitutional changes…he was an officer in the Pennsylvania
Equal Rights League, an arm of the National Equal Rights League. These “Freedom” Amendments, which the great Charles Sumner called “sleeping giants”, marked America’s Second Revolution, forever changing the potential of what our country could aspire to be. Although there were dark days following Catto’s death regarding the much-expected rights and opportunities for equality that Catto and his colleagues envisioned and wanted, these laws remain in our Constitution and became the legal basis for the efforts of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund under Charles Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall. The laws provided the seeds for the Modern Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King. Catto’s work laid the important foundations that are the democratic values we hold dear today.

Yes, the issues of citizenship, voting rights, equity and opportunity remain unresolved, and it is for us to continue Catto’s work today. We now have this incredible memorial to help us to pursue Catto’s vision and advance his legacy.