

Race History: African American Pioneers in Reconstruction Historiography

As the twentieth century unfolded, black intellectuals, recognizing the political import of historical scholarship, worked to challenge and redefine public perceptions of African Americans. In sermons, essays, literary works, and editorials, these self-professed race men and women dissected Jim Crow's rhetorical scaffolding, challenged interpretations of Reconstruction, subversively manipulated dominant ideas about race, manhood and womanhood, and analyzed "race" as a contested field of discourse and inquiry. Their scholarly and literary work functioned as direct political acts designed to correct and disprove popular and scientific ideas about social ineptitude and political incompetence among African Americans. Black schools, lodge halls, exhibitions, parades, pageants, conventions, literary societies, periodicals, and church congregations all functioned as potential sites of exchange, deliberation and interrogation. This presentation, with particular attention to Georgia, examines the years from the turn of the 20th century and the 1935 publication of W. E. B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* and illuminates the work of the often ignored (indeed unknown) African American intellectuals and writers who committed themselves to preserving, documenting, and promoting "race history."