

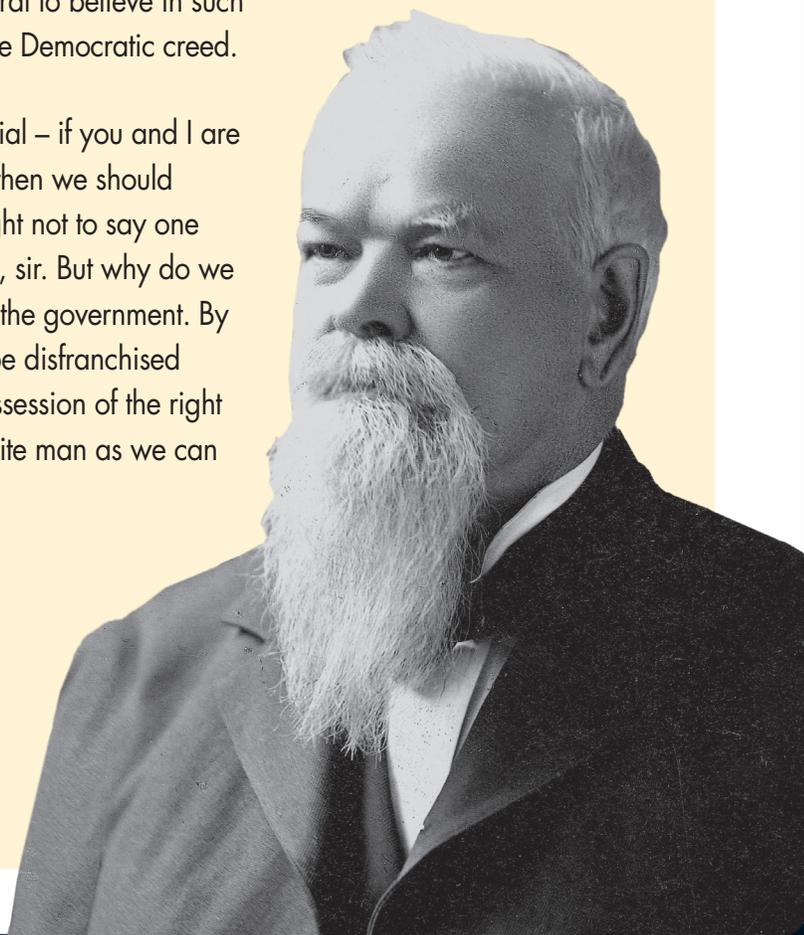
By the Kansas Historical Society

Minutes of the Wyandotte Constitutional Convention: The Remarks of William Hutchinson

William Hutchinson was a farmer who lived in Lawrence. He was a delegate from Douglas County. Born in Vermont, Hutchinson was 35 years old in 1859 during the Wyandotte Constitutional Convention. We know that he was active in free-state organizations. During the convention debates, Hutchinson actively fought to strike the word "white" from the constitution. What follows is one of his speeches on the subject of suffrage.

Mr. President; I move to strike out the word "white." I believe, sir, this question of suffrage is not altogether a matter of policy, that there is something else to be considered. It is one of right, to some extent. What are we about to do? By this section we are about to declare that the privilege of exercising that right shall belong to a class, without any respect or regard to merit, cultivation or anything except color. I am too much of a Democrat to believe in such a doctrine. I believe this principle is contrary to the Democratic creed.

If the operation of the elective franchise is beneficial – if you and I are made better by being allowed the right to vote – then we should extend that benefit to every class of men. We ought not to say one class should be made less intelligent than we. No, sir. But why do we pretend to do it? We have the laws, the strength, the government. By that same rule every member on this floor might be disfranchised within twelve months. Any race that could get possession of the right to legislate, could as properly disfranchise the white man as we can a black man.



We are not here to make a Constitution for one class – for class legislation – but to make a Constitution for the whole people of the State of Kansas, and if we, in that act, disfranchise any particular sect, the responsibility is ours. We have no right to erect separate standards as to the right of the elective franchise. No right to say that a person who has eyes of a particular color or wears clothes of a particular color, shall exercise the privilege of the ballot-box. There might be some plausibility in an amendment that a person should have a certain degree of intelligence to become privileged to exercise the right.

We must go back to the work of this morning, and revise and change our declaration of rights. It declares all men are equally free and independent, and possessed by nature of certain inalienable rights. We declared that this morning, and this afternoon we propose to stultify ourselves, and say that Chinese or blacks who happen to come here shall be disfranchised and deprived of the right of freemen. I believe that it is not in accordance with that spirit of liberty which is now advancing before the world for us to insert a provision of that kind.

It might have been justifiable generations ago, but in this age, when one-half of the free States have allowed the black man to exercise the right of suffrage – we, at this late day, having the advantage of all their experience, should act with the utmost caution before we say, by this act, that we cannot appreciate this great blessing of liberty so generally, so widely, as the people of the far East.

It has been said that Kansas was the place to exercise these modern ideas; that this was the field for improvement and advancement, especially with reference to our forms of government. Sir, we have endeavored to strike down the forms of tyranny, and the idea that I am better than thou – and yet we are about to insert this old relic of the dark days. I had hoped this word “white” would not be inserted in our Constitution.

