

Former senator offers history lesson

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Former U.S. Sen. William “Mo” Cowan knows history -- and his place in it.



Cowan, a native of Yadkin County, was appointed in January to replace Secretary of State John Kerry to represent Massachusetts in the U.S. Senate for the few months until an election could be assembled. He became only the eighth African American in the history of the Senate.

Just three African Americans – William Brooke, now-President Barack Obama and Carol Mosley Braun – have ever been elected to a first term in the Senate in state-wide elections.

“I wouldn’t call that an indictment of the nation’s attitude about black people so much as I would call it evidence,” said Cowan, an attorney. “It’s evidence that while we may have made progress in terms of racial equality, we still have a lot of work to do.”

Cowan graduated from Forbush High School in Yadkin County in 1987, attended Duke University and then Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, before he landed at the governor's office in Massachusetts. He was named as Democratic Gov. Deval Patrick's chief of staff in 2010, after previously working with Patrick as general counsel.

He was in Statesville Saturday to talk to a group of genealogy enthusiasts about the Emancipation Proclamation, which celebrates its sesquicentennial this year.

Cowan said there is a fair amount of myth and misunderstanding regarding the Proclamation and the time that followed.

“There is a sordid chapter in this nation’s history,” Cowan said in noting that written histories of many slaves were not kept during their time of servitude.

Further, Cowan said regarding first-generation slaves, “Their histories were drowned in the depths of the ocean during their passage from Africa.”

Cowan said that much of what people believe about the Emancipation Proclamation is skewed by a “mythology” that grew with the passing of the years.

“That myth is that slavery ended immediately and right away we became that glorious nation that President Lincoln envisioned,” Cowan said and added that the Emancipation Proclamation is valuable to history for what it allowed to happen in addition to what it mandated.

“Eventually,” he said, “it caused the Civil War to actually be about the ending of slavery.”

Lincoln’s primary motivation for the executive order that came to be known as the Emancipation Proclamation, Cowan said, was not the freeing of slaves per se but rather the ending of the war that had marked his entire presidency.

Indeed, the granting of freedom extended only to slaves in states that had seceded from the Union.

That is: "...all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free..."

The document goes on to read that all now-former slaves who were of "suitable condition" would be "received into the armed services of the United States."

Cowan said the real jewels of the Emancipation Proclamation were its "progeny," the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments.

In addition to the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, Cowan noted that this year marks the 50th year since the famed March On Washington at which, among other things, Martin Luther King delivered his most famous oratory, the "I Have A Dream" speech.

Cowan excerpted a portion of the speech in emphasizing his belief that inequality still exists between the races.

"In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check," Cowan said in retelling King's extended metaphor of a "promissory note" intended by the Founding Fathers to extend to every American. The Founders, he said, meant this for "all men, yes, black men as well as white men," but that it had become obvious that "America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned."

Cowan said the inequalities between the races are most apparent in schools around the country, which, he said, are now tainted with "segregation at levels last seen 40 years ago." He said that while only one in 106 white men in this nation between the ages of 18 and 40 are incarcerated, that number is one in every 15 African Americans.

"One in four black kids will not get their high school diplomas and the cost of college is rising faster than the cost of food, consumable goods and even medical care -- and we all know about the cost of medical care."

Cowan said he is sanguine in his belief that things are and will continue to improve.

"Believe it or not, I'm an eternal optimist," he said but explained that conditions will only move forward if zeal and fervor are part of the equation.

"Only an impassioned citizenry can make it happen," he said. "But it must be that way if we are to save the union."