

John W.A. Shaw (?-1909)

Democratic Politician, Journalist, and Civil Rights Activist

John William A. Shaw was born in Antigua, British West Indies. (Sources: 13, 22) The year of his immigration to the U.S. is unclear. He appears to have lived in New York City before attending Howard University in Washington, D.C., studying in the Theological Department in 1871-1872, and one session in the Medical College, 1873-1874. (Source: 5). He was affiliated with the First Congregational Church in Washington, D.C., and was employed by the American Missionary Association (AMA) to educate freedmen in the South. In 1875, he was sent by the AMA to Savannah. Shortly thereafter, he and his wife started a school of their own in the town of Thunderbolt, four miles from Savannah, returning to Washington, D.C., in 1877. (Source: 2)

After returning to New York, John Shaw became active in Democratic politics. He became one of the first Black officeholders in Tammany Hall, serving as Inspector of Water Meters and as Deputy Commissioner of Taxes for Queens County. (Sources: 3, 8, 12, 26). He served as Chairman of the New York State Colored Democratic Association in 1884. (Source: 13, 22, 24, 25) He was head of the organization United Colored Democracy, until being voted out in favor of **Edward A. Treadwell** of Flushing in 1899. (Source: 9) Shaw briefly published a newspaper, *The Suffragist*, affiliated with the party. (Source: 14, 26).

In May 1877, he applied for the position of Consul to Antigua, meeting with President Grover Cleveland and Vice President Thomas A. Hendricks in Washington, D.C. (Sources: 13, 18, 22, 25).

His wife, **Mary Elizabeth Shaw**, was Principal of the Colored School in Flushing, and in later life a philanthropist. (Source: 6). The year and place of their marriage is unknown. Mary Shaw died in 1905. Her will was contested, and her husband was named as a party in the lawsuit. (Source: 27).

John W.A. Shaw was living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the time of his death in 1909. His financial situation was such that the Cambridge Men's Forum, of which he had been a member, saw to it that he received a fitting burial. (Source: 17).

[Note: The views of the Democratic Party of Shaw's era were quite different from those of today. See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Democratic-Party>.]

Writings by John W.A. Shaw

Shaw, John W.A. *New light on the Negro question: An address delivered by John W.A. Shaw before the New England Suffrage Conference held in Parker Memorial Hall, Berkeley St., cor. Appleton, Boston, Mass., Monday evening, March 30, 1903.* Cambridge : J. Frank Facey, 1903. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=emu.010001224872&seq=16>

Shaw, John W.A. *Reveille: A pamphlet showing the Negro question in its municipal, national, and international aspect: Also setting forth claims of the Republican party upon the suffrages of the colored race.* Salem: Newcomb & Gauss, 1903. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101068020013&seq=34>

Shaw, John W.A. "Rt. Rev. Henry M. Turner: Presiding Bishop of the First District—An interesting sketch of a dignitary of the African Methodist Episcopal Church from the pen of a personal acquaintance." *The New York Age*, September 8, 1888, 1:4. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030005/1888-09-08/ed-1/seq-1/>

*reprinted from *The Flushing Journal*, August 25, 1888.

John W.A. Shaw in the Newspapers

The Morristown Gazette, September 22, 1880, 2:3-4

(Sources: 14)

...Under previous arrangements John W.A. Shaw, colored, and editor of the *Suffragist*, of New York city, had consented to address the Democracy to-night at the Wigwam, but he freely waived precedence, and to Mr. Hendricks was awarded the opening.

...At the conclusion of the Governor's address, John W.A. Shaw, of the *Suffragist*, spoke to the colored men for half an hour, urging them to desist from serving the Republican Party, which had proven itself so corrupt, and participate in the coming election in the interest of the Democracy. He spoke with great ease, and was generally applauded.

The New York Globe, June 23, 1883, 2:4

(Sources: 21)

*Black newspaper; predecessor to *The New York Freeman* and *The New York Age*

Mr. John W.A. Shaw, sometime one of the most fiery editors of the colored press, has just been employed as salesman by the extensive clothing house of the Liverpool and London Clothing Company, and assigned to duty at their store at the corner of Grand Street and Broadway, New York. We congratulate Mr. Shaw, and we commend the firm which has employed him. We regard this as another evidence that the large firms in this city are becoming disposed to cater for the trade of the colored people.

John W.A. Shaw in the Newspapers

***The New York Globe*, June 7, 1884, 2:1**

(Sources: 22)

*Black newspaper; predecessor to *The New York Freeman* and *The New York Age*

Mr. John W.A. Shaw, who was Chairman of the Colored Democratic Association of New York, has made application for the consulate at Antigua, in which place he was born. From the time of his naturalization he has been a Democrat, voting for Tilden and for all Democratic candidates since. Mr. Shaw says he is a Democrat from principle, and he has always endeavored to impress upon his race that the Democratic party is the party for them. He has resided both in the North and the South, and he says that it is undeniable that the status of the colored man in the South is better than in the North.

***The Savannah Morning News*, June 29, 1884, 1:4**

(Sources: 24)

New York, June 28—John W.A. Shaw, chairman of the New York Colored Democratic Association, announces that a delegation of thirty members of that organization will leave New York on Saturday, July 5, by a special car on the Erie Railway for their headquarters in Chicago. Their object is to impress upon the National Democratic Convention the importance of recognizing colored freedmen in the coming Presidential campaign. The headquarters of their organization for this purpose has been established at Flushing, L.I.

John W.A. Shaw in the Newspapers

The New York Globe, June 14, 1884, 3:3-4

(Sources: 23)

*Black newspaper; predecessor to *The New York Freeman* and *The New York Age*

The Colored Democratic State Association, of which Mr. J.W.A. Shaw is Chairman, opened their large and commodious rooms at 135 Grand Street, on Monday night last, with electric lights, a brass band and an enthusiastic audience. At 9 o'clock the hall was crowded with a mixed multitude of black and white citizens who had come to listen to the gospel of democracy as propounded by colored men, as well as to hear speeches from the Hon. Thos. F. Grady, Gen. Roger A. Pryor, and other distinguished democratic speakers. The chairman opened the meeting and in an address of great brilliancy explained the objects of the organization and the motives that had actuated its authors in its formation. Among other things he said that the black people of this country had been long enough the tools of an unscrupulous set of political tricksters and hypocrites, and intended to emancipate themselves from a thralldom worse than that of human bondage...

The Columbian and Democrat, July 25, 1884, 1:2
(Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania)

(Sources: 11)

...This game was cut short when a colored statesman of New York arrived in this city on his return from Chicago, John W.A. Shaw, Chairman of the Committee on Organization of the New York Colored Democrat's Association. Shaw is a man well able to tell why he is a Democrat, and he gathered his brethren around him and told them the lessons of the war in a way that they never thought of before. In conversation he said: "I believe that the liberal and statesmanlike administration of Grover Cleveland as Governor of New York has paved the way for hundreds of colored voters, who tired of the Republican Party, but held in the ranks by fear of Democratic partisanship, are now sanguine of freedom. The colored men are tired of the gospel of hate, as preached by the Republican party in its press and pulpit. They turn from its special legislation, which has invited to them more hostility than it ever did them good. We refuse to be parties to Republican perfidy and decline to be regarded as its wards and dependents, and we propose to assist in the election of Grover Cleveland, whose name is a guarantee of honest and efficient government."

John W.A. Shaw in the Newspapers

The Gettysburg Compiler, May 5, 1885, 2:2

(Sources: 13)

Mr. John W.A. Shaw, who was Chairman of the Colored Democratic Association of New York, has made application for the consulate at Antigua, in which place he was born. From the time of his naturalization he has been a Democrat, voting for Tilden and for all Democratic candidates since. Mr. Shaw says he is a Democrat from principle, and he has always endeavored to impress upon his race that the Democratic party is the party for them. He has resided both in the North and the South, and he says that it is undeniable that the status of the colored man in the South is better than in the North.

The Staunton Spectator, May 6, 1885, 2:7

(Sources: 25)

Colored Democrats Asking Recognition.—Mr. John W.A. Shaw, who was Chairman of the Colored Democratic Association of New York, has made application for the consulate at Antigua, in which place he was born. From the time of his naturalization he has been a democrat, voting for Tilden and for all democratic candidates since. Mr. Shaw says he is a democrat from principle, and he has always endeavored to impress upon his race that the democratic party is the party for them. He has resided in both the North and the South, and he says it is undeniable that the status of the colored man in the South is better than in the North. To-day he was presented to the President by Vice-President Hendricks. He said to t[h]e President that he and other democrats had to encounter many difficulties and oftentimes contumely. He was not a spoilsman, and he was a democrat because he believed it right to be one. He had no doubt that this administration would do full justice to the colored people. As to the colored democrats, he suggested that they should be placed on the same footing as the white democrats, and that the administration should show its appreciation of their labors and sacrifices by substantial recognition. The President listened with evident interest to Mr. Shaw, and assured him that what he said should have serious consideration.
Wash Cor. Balt. Sun., April 29

John W.A. Shaw in the Newspapers

The New York Freeman, May 9, 1885, 1:4.

(Sources: 18)

*Black newspaper; preceded by *The New York Globe* and succeeded by *The New York Age*

Mr. John W. A. Shaw of New York, who is an applicant for the Consulate at Antigua, West Indies, was in Washington last week, and was introduced to President Cleveland by Vice-President Thomas A. Hendricks in a very neat and flattering speech. Mr. Hendricks spoke of Mr. Shaw as “an original colored Democrat,” and said that at sundry times Mr. Shaw had rendered valiant service to the democracy of Indiana. Whatever may be the antecedents of Mr. Hendricks towards colored men, we are forced to admit that his course towards Mr. Shaw in this matter indicates that he knows a Democrat when he sees him – whether he be black or white. Mr. Shaw was very highly pleased with the reception he received at the hands of the President. He also called upon Secretary Bayard, who cordially received him.

The Evening Star, January 13, 1887, supplement, 1:6

(Sources: 12)

A colored Democrat appointed.—Commissioner of Public Works Gen. John Newton, in New York yesterday, appointed John W.A. Shaw, colored, as an inspector of water meters. He is the first colored man that has ever held a position in the New York department of water works. The salary is \$1,200 a year. Mr. Shaw is a Democrat.

John W.A. Shaw in the Newspapers

The New York Freeman, January 15, 1887, 2:4.

(Sources: 19)

*Black newspaper; preceded by *The New York Globe* and succeeded by *The New York Age*

Mr. John W.A. Shaw has received an appointment as Inspector of Meters in the Department of Public Works of New York City. Under the Administration of Mayor Grace Mr. Shaw held a position as Street Inspector.

The New York Freeman, February 19, 1887, 3:3

(Sources: 20)

*Black newspaper; preceded by *The New York Globe* and succeeded by *The New York Age*

While talking with a colored compositor the other day, I chanced to learn from him that before too many more months will have passed away another “long felt want” will appear, and that negotiations to that end have been in progress. It is said that Street Inspector John W.A. Shaw will man the editorial helm and the newsy craft will sail under the auspices of politics—Independent of course. There exists in this peculiar line of race advocates and leaders a mournful parental affiliation with the National Capital. New York has annually noted the birth of colored publications, while Washington is said to witness their periodical deaths and has been dubbed with the fascinating appellation of “graveyard for Negro journals.”

John W.A. Shaw in the Newspapers

The New York Age, October 29, 1887, 1:5

(Source: 15)

*Black newspaper; preceding titles *The New York Globe* and *The New York Freeman*

Mr. John W.A. Shaw has returned to the Republican fold and his experience, which is quite varied, will furnish many a campaign text, as he is a most gifted speaker.

[Note: The meaning of this text is unclear. It appeared within a report on Black Republican political organizations. Did Shaw defect from the Democratic Party for a time?]

The Sun, June 19, 1898, 24:6

(Sources: 26)

John W.A. Shaw of Flushing, who has been a Democrat for more than twenty years and once published a newspaper in New York which he called the *Suffragist*, has just been appointed Deputy Commissioner of Taxes for the Borough of Queens. It is estimated that Tammany has appointed nearly a hundred Afro-Americans to office in Greater New York.

John W.A. Shaw in the Newspapers

The New York Age, July 20, 1905, 8:1

(Sources: 16)

*Black newspaper; preceding titles *The New York Globe* and *The New York Freeman*

Mr. John W.A. Shaw has just issued a pamphlet entitled "The Conflicts of a Race." Mr. Shaw is a man of superior scholarship and literary attainments. His pamphlet contains thoughtful contributions to the *Boston Evening Transcript* in recent months. These contributions are valuable reviews of some phases of the Negro problem set forth in elegant style and with much historical learning.

The New York Age, August 5, 1909, 3:4

(Sources: 17)

*Black newspaper; preceding titles *The New York Globe* and *The New York Freeman*

A memorial service in memory of the late John W.A. Shaw were [sic] held last Sunday under the auspices of the Cambridge Men's Forum, of which at one time he had been an active member. It should also be said with much credit to the Forum that it (through Mr. J.T. Harrison, the secretary) made it possible for Mr. Shaw to be given a burial that was in accordance with the attainments that he had reached in life, especially as a journalist.

John W.A. Shaw in the 1880 Federal Census

Source: FamilySearch

<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GYBX-96FV?view=index&personArk=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AMZfq-VT7&action=view>

Page: 356

Line: 24

Age: 32

Occupation: Editor of Paper

Place of Birth: W.I. Island [West Indies]

Sources

Books and Articles

- (1) Aiello, Thomas. *The Battle for the Souls of Black Folk: W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and the Debate That Shaped the Course of Civil Rights*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2016.
- (2) De Boer, Clara Merritt. "Religious Education of the Freedmen." In *His Truth is Marching On: African Americans Who Taught the Freedmen for the American Missionary Association, 1861-1877*, 197-326. London: Routledge, 1995.
- (3) Domingo, W.A. "Gift of the Black Tropics". In *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, edited by Alain Locke, 341-349. New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925.
- (4) Holder, Calvin B. "The Rise of the West Indian Politician in New York City, 1900-1952," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, 4, no. 1 (January 1980), 45-59.
- (5) Lamb, Daniel Smith. *A Historical, Biographical and Statistical Souvenir, Compiled and Edited for and by Authority of the Medical Faculty of Howard University*. Washington, D.C.: R. Beresford, 1900.
- (6) Martinez, Gina. "Queens Library honors 19th century philanthropist." QNS. February 14, 2018. <https://qns.com/2018/02/queens-library-honors-19th-century-flushing-philanthropist/>
- (7) Watkins-Owens, Irma. *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.

Sources

Newspaper Articles. I

(8) *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. "A New Phase of Politics." February 2, 1899, 5:3.

https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/50406031/?match=1&pqsid=enAXz_ItpdKaQxYZVo1c6w%3A1992715%3A2024453762

(9) *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. January 27, 1899, 7. <https://bklyn.newspapers.com/article/the-brooklyn-daily-eagle-jwashaw-un-e/125609336/>

(10) *Brooklyn Daily Times*. "Tax Commissioners for Queens." June 4, 1898, 1:6

https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/556052378/?match=1&terms=%22John%20W.A.%20Shaw%22&pqsid=enAXz_ItpdKaQxYZVo1c6w%3A75008%3A519124133

(11) *Columbian and Democrat*. July 25, 1884, 1:2. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83032011/1884-07-25/ed-1/seq-2/>

(12) *The Evening Star*. January 13, 1887, supplement, 1:6. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1887-01-13/ed-1/seq-5/>

(13) *Gettysburg Compiler*, May 5, 1885, 2:2.

https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/15520433/?match=1&terms=%22john%20W.A.%20Shaw%22&pqsid=enAXz_ItpdKaQxYZVo1c6w%3A2093054%3A1600743465

(14) *Morristown Gazette*, "Hendricks on Garfield: Speech which will Create Profound Sensation—Scathing Arraignment of the Republican Candidate." September 22, 1880, 2:3-4. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033681/1880-09-22/ed-1/seq-2>

Sources

Newspaper Articles. II

(15) *New York Age*. October 29, 1887, 1:5. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030005/1887-10-29/ed-1/seq-1>

(16) *New York Age*. July 20, 1905, 8:1

https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/31963128/?match=1&terms=%22john%20W.A.%20Shaw%22&pqsid=enAXz_ItPdKaQxYZVo1c6w%3A2150613%3A1086020003

(17) *New York Age*. August 5, 1909, 3:4.

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(18) *New York Freeman*. May 9, 1885, 1:4. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83027102/1885-05-09/ed-1/seq-2/>

(19) *New York Freeman*. January 15, 1887, 2:4. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83027102/1887-01-15/ed-1/seq-2>

(20) *New York Freeman*. February 19, 1887, 3:3. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83027102/1887-02-19/ed-1/seq-3/>

(21) *New York Globe*. June 23, 1883, 2:4. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83027106/1883-06-23/ed-1/seq-2/>

(22) *New York Globe*. June 7, 1884, 2:1. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83027106/1884-06-07/ed-1/seq-2/>

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(23) *New York Globe*. June 14, 1884, 3:3-4. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83027106/1884-06-14/ed-1/seq-3>

(24) *Savannah Morning News*. June 29, 1884, 1:4. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015137/1884-06-29/ed-1/seq-1/>

(25) *Staunton Spectator*. May 6, 1885, 2:7. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024718/1885-05-06/ed-1/seq-2>

(26) *Sun*. June 19, 1898, 24:6. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030272/1898-06-19/ed-1/seq-24/>

[Note: Newspapers.com requires sign-in, available at many libraries.]

Legal Cases

(27) *Farmers' Loan Trust Co. v. Shaw*, 56 Misc. 201, 107 N.Y.S. 837 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. 1907). https://books.google.com/books?id=_crP4uMFz_kC