

THE NEGRO: THE SOUTHERNER'S PROBLEM

BY

THOMAS NELSON PAGE

THIRD PAPER: ITS PRESENT CONDITION AND ASPECT, AS
SHOWN BY STATISTICS

HAVING in the two previous papers undertaken to show the relation between the Whites of the South and the Negroes at the time of the abolition of slavery, and having traced the change in that relation and pointed out the mistakes which, in the writer's opinion, were mainly responsible for whatever trouble has since arisen between them, it now remains to see what the present condition is; how far it is attributable to those causes, and what promise the future holds of amendment.

Thirty-eight years have passed since the Negro was set free and became his own master. By sentimentalists and Negro writers and orators, most of the Negro's shortcomings are usually charged to slavery, and undoubtedly slavery leaves certain traits which the student can readily detect. But most of the class of writers referred to ignore the fact that the Negro at the close of slavery was in a higher condition of civilization than when he came a savage from the wilds of Africa; that, indeed, this very period of slavery in America had given to him the only semblance of civilization which the Negro race has possessed since the dawn of history.

Whatever evils slavery may have entailed upon the Negro, this much may unquestionably be predicted of it; it left him a trained laborer and in good physical condition. He started in on a new era with a large share of friendliness on the part of the South and with the enthusiastic good-will of the North. He had little property, and not more than two or three per cent. were able to read; but he

commanded the entire field of labor in the South, while a certain percentage, composed of house-servants, had the knowledge which comes from holding positions of responsibility and from association with educated people.

When the war closed, among the four millions of negroes who then inhabited the South, there was, with the exception of the invalids, the cripples, and the superannuated, scarcely an adult who was not a trained laborer or a skilled artisan. In the cotton section they knew how to raise and prepare cotton; in the sugar belt they knew how to grow and grind sugar; in the tobacco, corn, wheat, and hay belt they knew how to raise and prepare for market those crops. They were the shepherds, cattle-men, horse-trainers, and raisers. The entire industrial work of the South was performed by them. They were the trained domestic servants; laundresses, nurses, and midwives. They were the carpenters, smiths, coopers, sawyers, wheelwrights, bricklayers, and boatmen. They were the tanners and shoemakers, miners and stone-cutters, tailors and knitters, spinners and weavers. Nearly all the houses in the South were built by them. They manufactured most of the articles that were manufactured in the South.

No exact statistics of the race at that time may be obtained, but a reasonably approximate estimate may be made, based on the known facts, as to the number of slaveholders, and the general relation of house-servants, mechanics, etc., to the entire population. It is known, for instance, that the slave-holder, whether he owned few or many, invariably had his best slaves as

domestic servants. It is equally well-known that the large plantations hired the services of those on the larger estates.

In 1860 there were in the Southern States between five and six hundred thousand slave-owners and slave hirers, and there were four million and a quarter slaves, or about eight slaves to each owner. In Georgia, for example, there were in 1860, 462,198 slaves, owned by 41,084 owners. Of these slave-owners, perhaps, every one had at least one house-servant, and most of them had several. Striking a mean between the smaller slave-owner and the larger, it would probably be found that the proportion of mechanics and artisans to the entire population was about the same that it is in any agricultural community, or as the slave is known to be generally not as industrious and efficient as the free workman, the percentage was possibly higher than it is to-day in the West or in the agricultural parts of the South. It is not pretended that this is more than a conjecture, but it is a conjecture based upon what appears a conservative estimate.

Since that time, over \$109,000,000 has been expended by the South on the Negro's education, besides what has been expended by private charity, which is estimated to amount to \$30,000,000.

The South has faithfully applied itself during all these years to giving the Negroes all the opportunities possible for attaining an education, and it is one of the most creditable pages in her history that in face of the horror of Negro-domination during the Reconstruction period, of the disappointment; in face of the fact that the education of the Negroes has appeared to be used by them only as a weapon with which to oppose the White race, the latter should have persistently given so largely of its store to provide this misused education. Of the \$109,000,000 which the Southern States have, since the war, applied to the education of the Negro by voluntary taxation, over \$100,000,000 was raised by the votes of the Whites from taxation on the property of the Whites. Several times of late years, propositions have been made in various legislatures in the South to devote the money raised by taxation on the property of each race exclusively to the education of that race, but in every case, to their credit be it said, the propositions have been

overwhelmingly defeated.* The total expenditure for public schools in the South in the year 1898-1899 was \$32,849,892, of which \$6,569,978 was to sustain Negro schools.

Inspection of the records will reveal something of the fruits of the \$140,000,000 expended on the education of the Negroes at the South, and the rest must be learned from those who have studied the subject at first hand.

It seems to the writer that one of the fundamental errors which has inhered in all the discussion which has taken place on the Negro question is in considering the Negroes as absolutely of one class. A brief consideration of the matter will show on the contrary that the colored population of the South, though they were, with the exception of a few Arabs, all of Negro blood, were, when they came to this country, of different tribes; and there were, even during the time of slavery and are yet more markedly now, grades among them; grades of intellect, of character, and of ability, which point to, if not varying racial, at least, varying tribal forces. And however they may all appear to herd together and look at most matters not from an individual and rational but from a racial standpoint, a careful study will disclose certain distinctions which have the mark of tribal distinctions, while others will show the elements of class distinctions. These class distinctions, though still elementary, are beginning to make themselves apparent.

The line of cleavage unhappily does not follow that of conduct or good manners, much less that of character, but, perhaps, it may approximate them more closely in time, and the upper class will learn and cause it to be understood that conduct, character, and good manners are the key to admission.

It is the intention of the writer in this discussion to recognize this distinction, and, when he speaks of "the Negroes," he desires generally to be understood as referring to the great body of the race, and not as including what may be termed the upper fraction—that is, those who,

* According to the Educational Report to the United States Bureau of Education for 1898-1899, "the total enrollment in the public schools of the South (the sixteen former slave States and the District of Columbia) in the year 1898-1899, was 5,662,259; the number of the colored race, 1,506,641 and the number of the white race, 4,155,618. Of the white school population (5,954,400), 69.71 per cent. were enrolled in the public schools, and of the negro school population (2,912,910), 51.89 per cent.

by reason of intellect, education, and character, form so clearly an exception that they must be considered as a separate class.

The Negroes, indeed, may be divided into three classes.

The first is a small class, comparatively speaking, who are more or less educated, some being well educated and well conducted; others, with a semblance of education and none too well behaved. The former constitute what may be termed the upper fraction; the latter lack the essential element of character and even moral perception.

The second class is composed of a respectable, well-behaved, self-respecting element; sensible, though with little or no education, and, except when under the domination of passion, good citizens. This class embraces most of the more intelligent of the older generation who were trained in slavery, and a considerable element of the intelligent middle-aged, conservative workers of the race who were trained by this generation. The two together may be called the backbone of the race.

The third class is composed of those who are wholly ignorant, or in whom, though they have what they call education, this so-called education is unaccompanied by any of the fruits of character which education is supposed to produce. Among these are many who esteem themselves in the first class, and, because of a veneer of education, are not infrequently confounded with them.

The first two classes may easily be reckoned with. They contain the elements which make good citizens and which should enable them to secure all proper recognition and respect. They need no weapon but that which they possess—good citizenship.

Unfortunately, the great body of the race, and a vast percentage of the growing generation, belong to the third class. It is this class which has to be reckoned with.

It is like a vast sluggish mass of uncooled lava over a large section of the country, burying some portions and affecting the whole. It is apparently harmless, but beneath its surface smolder fires which may at any time burst forth unexpectedly and destroy all within reach. It is this mass, increasing from beneath, not from above, which constitutes the Negro question.

In the discussion that takes place in the periodical press and in conventions relating to the progress of the colored race, a great deal is made of the advance of the race since the abolition of slavery. It is asserted that the race has accumulated many hundreds of millions of dollars. Just how much, it is difficult to say. Authorities differ widely. The last Negro member of Congress,* in a speech delivered in the House of Representatives on January 29, 1901, undertook to give the advance of his race in the thirty-two preceding years. "Since that time," he says, "we have reduced the illiteracy of the race at least 45 per cent. We have written and published nearly 500 books. We have nearly 300 newspapers, three of which are dailies. We have now in practice over 2,000 lawyers and a corresponding number of doctors. We have accumulated over \$12,000,000 worth of school property and about \$40,000,000 of church property. We have about 140,000 farms and homes valued at in the neighborhood of \$750,000,000, and personal property valued at about \$170,000,000. . . . We have 32,000 teachers in the schools of the country. We have built, with the aid of our friends, about 20,000 churches, and support 7 colleges, 17 academies, 50 high schools, 5 law schools, 5 medical schools, and 25 theological seminaries. We have over 600,000 acres of land in the South alone."

It may be assumed that, as he was glorifying his race, this is the outside estimate of what they have accomplished. To the writer, it would appear a very high estimate. Certainly the educational achievement of which he boasts cannot justly be attributed, in the main, to the Negro race. The White race furnished 95 per cent. of the money for the schools, and a yet larger proportion for the colleges.

It is stated that "before the war, the South had a free Negro population in excess of a quarter of a million souls," and, according to an estimate which has been made by one of the distinguished members of the race, the value of property owned by free Negroes was between \$35,000,000 and \$40,000,000.† Although the exact amount must be based somewhat on conjecture, it is certain that there were a considerable number of well-to-do free Negroes

* George H. White, of North Carolina.

† "The American Negro," by William Hannibal Thomas, p. 74. Macmillan & Co.

in the country at that time. Some of those in the South were land-owners and slave-owners, while of the 226,216 who lived outside of the slave states, a fair proportion were well-to-do. To this sum must be added the amount that was accumulated during the Reconstruction period, by other means than those of honest thrift. The residue marks the advance of the Negro race in material progress.

Unhappily for those who claim that the Negro race has shown extraordinary thrift since its emancipation thirty-eight years ago, the records, when examined, fail to bear out the contention.

On the 29th of June Mr. Charles A. Gardiner, of the New York bar, delivered a notable address at Albany, before the Convocation of the University of the State of New York, on a "Constitutional and Educational Solution of the Negro Problem," in which he presented some remarkable statements relating to the condition of the Negroes. He showed that, in 1890, the real and personal property of the fifteen old slave states was \$13,380,517,311, of which the blacks owned only 3.3 per cent., an average of \$64.20 per capita. The six Atlantic and Gulf states had \$3,215,127,929, of which the blacks owned only 3.5 per cent., an average of \$28.60 each. The writer has tried to obtain the later statistics, but has not been successful in securing complete statistics, owing to the fact that the United States Census Bureau has not yet completed its calculations touching this subject, and that many of the states do not keep separately the records of the property owned by the Whites and Negroes. He has, however, secured from the records of the states of Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia, where the records are kept separately, the statistics showing the actual and relative amount of property owned by the Negroes for the year 1902:

ASSESSED VALUE OF ALL PROPERTY OWNED BY NEGROES.

	Population.	Assessed Value.
Arkansas	366,856	\$11,263,400*
Georgia	1,034,813	15,188,069
North Carolina. .	624,468	9,765,986
Virginia	660,722	17,580,390
Total	2,686,859	\$53,797,845

* In Arkansas the total value of all property, including railroad property of the state, is \$225,276,681. The taxes assessed on the property of the Whites was \$3,699,025, while the taxes assessed on the property of the Negroes was \$205,954. The value of the property held by the Negroes was obtained by assigning to them an amount proportionate to the taxes paid by them.

It is possible that the states of Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia may be considered quite representative of the entire South. The Negroes are believed to be as well off in these states as in any others. The four states contain 2,686,859 Negroes, which is 30.39 per cent. of the entire Negro population of the whole United States, and the statistics show that this 30.39 per cent. of the entire Negro population own now, in real and personal property listed for taxation, only \$53,797,845, which is but \$20.02 per capita. The assessed value of property in the Southern States may be stated to be generally, at least, three-quarters of the actual value.

Georgia has been not infrequently cited as a state in which the Negro has thriven somewhat exceptionally. It contains more Negroes than does any other state, having, by the census of 1900, 1,034,813 Negroes. In 1860 it contained 465,698, so that the Negroes have increased there at the rate of 142,279 every ten years. The Bulletin of the Department of Labor, No. 35, July, 1901, contains a valuable paper by Prof. W. E. B. Du Bois, of Atlanta University, on the Negro landholder in Georgia, based on a close study of the conditions of the Negro in that state. Among other matters he gives a table containing the assessed value of all property owned by Negroes in Georgia from 1874 to 1900.

ASSESSED VALUE OF TOTAL PROPERTY OWNED BY NEGROES OF GEORGIA, 1874 TO 1900.

Year.	Assessed Value.	Year.	Assessed Value.
1874	\$6,157,798	1888	\$9,631,271
1875	5,393,885	1889	10,415,330
1876	5,488,867	1890	12,322,003
1877	5,430,844	1891	14,196,735
1878	5,124,875	1892	14,869,575
1879	5,182,398	1893	14,960,675
1880	5,764,293	1894	14,387,730
1881	6,478,951	1895	12,941,230
1882	6,589,876	1896	13,292,816
1883	7,582,395	1897	13,619,690
1884	8,021,525	1898	13,719,200
1885	8,153,390	1899	13,447,423
1886	8,655,298	1900	14,118,720
1887	8,963,479

From this table it will be found that the taxable values of all the property owned by Negroes in Georgia in the year 1874 were \$6,157,798. In 1890 the Negro population was 858,815. In 1892 the property valuation had risen to \$14,869,575, and in 1900, when the population was 1,034,813, it was only \$14,118,720 or an

actual falling off, though the Negroes appear to have increased 23.9 per cent. in this time.*

Such is the showing of statistics. But under this economic presentation lies a deeper question. What have the thousands of churches and schools and colleges, maintained at the cost of a hundred and forty million dollars, produced? What kind of men and women have they turned out? What fruits have they brought forth, of moral stamina; of character; of purity of life; of loftiness or even correctness of ideals? These are the true tests of progress.

To reach a correct answer to these questions, we may inquire first: Has the percentage of crime decreased in the race generally? Has the wage-earning capacity of the race generally increased in proportion to the rise of wages? Has the race generally improved, morally and mentally? Is the relative position of the race to that of the White race higher than it was?

Unquestionably, a certain proportion of the Negro race has risen notably since the era of emancipation. In the cities and towns, a proportion of the colored population—that is, the upper fraction—have not only accumulated property but have attained a higher standing, based partly on property, partly on character, and partly on intellectual advance. But, unless the universal testimony of the White people of the South is unreliable, this rise is confined largely to the towns or to those regions where the Negroes have had the aid, sympathy, and encouragement of the Whites. And it appears to the writer that this element is not as large as is generally assumed, and that this very advance has separated them all the more widely from the great body of the colored race. Study of the question, moreover, discovers that almost all of the intellectual advance in the Negro race is confined to this upper fraction of the race; that, perhaps, nine-tenths of the property accumulated has been accumulated by this class and by the other fraction that belongs to the second class who were trained in slavery, and that, measured by the ordinary standards of

character, intellect, and civic standing; the other nine-tenths of the race, so far from advancing in any way, have either stood stagnant or have retrograded.

According to the United States Census of 1890, the native White criminals in the United States numbered 40,471; the native Whites whose parents were also native-born, numbered 21,037; the Negro criminals (whose parents were native) numbered 24,277.* A comparison of the rural colored population will show that possibly over ninety per cent. of the property now owned by the Negroes has been accumulated by those who were either trained in slavery or grew up immediately after the War, so that they received the beneficial effects of the habits of industry in which their race was at that time trained. It will show in the next place that the proportion of convicts in the state penitentiaries in the Southern states from the negroes is from 85 to 93 per cent. of the total number of convicts confined. In Louisiana the proportion is 85 per cent. of all state criminals. In Alabama it is 85.4 per cent. In Florida, 86.4 per cent. In Mississippi it is 91 per cent. In Georgia it is 90 per cent., and in South Carolina it is 93.2 per cent.† In the District of Columbia, where the Negroes are assumed to have had exceptional advantage and where possibly a certain element of them are as well off as anywhere in the country, they furnished, a year or two ago, 86 per cent. of the criminals. Of these convicts, more than nine-tenths have grown up since slavery was abolished.

Meantime, the Negro has retrograded as a workman until he has not only lost the field in which he once had no rival, but is in danger of losing even the ability to compete for its recovery. The superiority of the older farm-hands to the younger generation is so universally asserted throughout the South that it must be given some of the validity of general reputation. And whereas, as has been shown, a generation ago all the mechanical work of the South was in the hands of the Negroes, only a small proportion of it is done by them to-day.

Fifteen years ago one of the suburbs of Richmond was largely built up by a contractor whose foreman was a Negro. There

* The Comptroller-General of Georgia reports that the assessed value of the property of the White taxpayers of Georgia for 1902 was \$452,122,577. The property for the Negroes for the same year was \$1,000,000, though considerably larger. Du Bois, is only 3.25 per cent. of the total assessment of the state.

* *World Almanac*, 1903.

† Address of Charles A. Gardiner, cited before.

no question raised about it. The foreman knew his business; had been raised among the Whites; knew how to get along with White men, and was respected and esteemed by them. This was at that time not uncommon.

What is the situation now? The races are more widely divided than ever before. White mechanics and Negro mechanics no longer work together, generally, as of old. No contractor could do now what the man who built "Barton Heights" did fifteen years ago. The number of Negro carpenters and mechanics is greatly reduced; and the writer is informed by intelligent Negroes that such work as they do is mainly among their own people. The causes are not far to seek. It is partly due to a failure of ability in the Negro to hold up his own in the struggle of competition, and partly to the changed relations between him and the White. The old feeling of friendliness and amity has waned, and in its room has come a cold indifference, if not actual hostility. The new Negro has been taught that he is the equal of the White, and he is always asserting it and trying to prove it by any way but the right way — the equality of his work.

Washington City has ever since the time of emancipation appeared a sort of Mecca to many of the Negro race. There, numbers of that race have had opportunities which have been wanting to them in the South, and there may be found to-day, perhaps, the best educated element of the race to be found anywhere. Within the last year the Negro organization known as the True Reformers built in that city a handsome and expensive structure for the use of their race, and built it wholly with Negro labor. When, however, the workmen competent to do such work were sought, it was found necessary to go to the South for them.

Yet even in the South the Negro artisan sufficiently trained to compete now with his White rival is comparatively rare.

"The slave-disciplined mechanic has no successor in the ranks of the freedmen. . . ."

So far, then, as statistics would indicate, the improvement that exists among the Negroes is not shown by the race at large as is usually alleged, but is shown, in the main, by the upper fraction.

This proposition is borne out also by the testimony of the great majority of the Southern Whites who live in constant touch with the Blacks; who have known them in every relation of life in a way that no one who has not lived among them can know them. Universally, they will tell you that while the old-time Negroes were industrious, saving, and, when not misled, well-behaved, kindly, respectful, and self-respecting, and while the remnant of them who remain still retain generally these characteristics, the "new issue," for the most part, are lazy, thriftless, intemperate, insolent, dishonest, and without the most rudimentary elements of morality.

They will tell you further that education such as they receive in the public schools, so far from appearing to uplift them, appears to be without any appreciable beneficial effect upon their morals or their standing as citizens. But more than this; universally, they will tell you of the general depravity and retrogression of the Negroes at large in sections in which they are left to themselves, closely resembling a reversion to barbarism.

It is generally assumed that progress, as applied to a class or a race, signifies some advance in moral standing, or, at least, some improvement in the elements of character on which morality is based.

It is unfortunate that the statistics in the field of morality cannot be obtained; but in this field, as in others, the testimony of those who have had the best opportunities for observation is all one way. Southerners of every class and calling, without exception, bear witness to the depressing fact that, leaving out the small upper fraction, the Negro race has not advanced at all in morality.

Unhappily, the fountain is tainted at the source. The great body of the race have scarcely any notion of the foundation principles of pure family life. They appear not only to have no idea of morality, but to lack any instinct upon which such an idea can be founded. It is usually charged that slavery was responsible for the absence of morality throughout the race. Doubtless, during slavery there was a sufficient amount of immorality to be the basis for almost any reasonable charge, yet study of the question has convinced at least one person that the illicit relations between the two races during the period of slavery

* "The American Negro," by William Hannibal Thomas, p. 68.

He has probably been greatly exaggerated. He has come to believe further that while illicit intercourse between the two races is less and, perhaps, markedly less now than it was during the period of slavery, the immorality of the great body of the Negro race has largely increased since that time. That this immorality exists, is the testimony not only of the Whites, but also of members of the race who have, with an open mind, made a study of the conditions of their people. Perhaps the most remarkable study of the Negro which has appeared is the book entitled "The American Negro," by William Hannibal Thomas, of Massachusetts. No inconsiderable part of its value is owing to the fact that the author, a free, colored man, has had both the power to observe closely and the courage to record boldly the results of his observations. In the chapter on "Moral Lapses" the author says: "All who know the Negro recognize, however, that the chief and overpowering element in his make-up is an imperious, sexual impulse which, aroused at the slightest incentive, sweeps aside all restraints in the pursuit of physical gratification. We may say now that this element of Negro character constitutes the main incitement to degeneracy of the race and is the chief hindrance to its social uplifting. . . ."

"The Negro's ethical code sternly reprobrates dancing, theater attendance, and all social games of chance. It does not, however, forbid lying, rum-drinking, or stealing. Furthermore, a man may trail his loathsome form into the sanctity of private homes, seduce a wife, sister, or daughter with impunity, and be the father of a score of illegitimate children by as many mothers, and yet be a disciple of holiness and honored with public confidence."

His chapter on this subject will be, to those unfamiliar with it, a terrible exposure of the depravity of the Negroes in their social life, but it is only what those who have studied the subject know.

The curse of this frightful immorality is over the church and the school, and gives no evidence of abatement.

"The simple truth," admits the writer already quoted, "is that there is going on side by side in the Negro people a minimum progress with a maximum regress." "It is, therefore," he says on page 183,

"almost impossible to find a person of either sex over fifteen years of age who has not had carnal intercourse." And again, on page 184, he declares: "Marital immoralities, however, are not confined to the poor, the ignorant, and the degraded among the freed people, but are equally common among those who presume to be educated and refined."

Unfortunately for the race, this depressing view is borne out by the increase of crime among them; by the increase of superstition, with its black trail of unnamable immorality and vice; by the homicides and murders, and by the outbreak and growth of the brutal crime which has chiefly brought about the frightful crime of lynching which stains the good name of the South and has spread northward with the spread of the Negro ravisher.

It is a fact, which no one will deny, that the crime of rape was substantially unknown during the period of slavery, and was hardly known during the first years of freedom: it is the fatal product of new conditions. Twenty-five years ago women in the South went unattended, with no more fear of attack than they have in New England. To-day, no woman in the South goes alone upon the highway out of sight of White men, except on necessity, and no man leaves his women alone in his house if he can help it. Over 500 White women and children have been assaulted in the South by Negroes within that time.

This is a terrible showing, and the most depressing part of it is the failure of the Negroes to address themselves to the moral improvement of their race.

None of this will affect the views of the politician or the doctrinaire, but it should, at least, give food for thought among the rest of our people, that these views are held almost universally by the intelligent White people of the South, irrespective of their different political or religious views; irrespective of their social or their business standing; and further, that, substantially, these views are held by any outsiders who go and see enough of the South to secure opportunities for close and general observation, and, precisely as their experience is broad and their means of information extensive, their views approximate those held by the White residents.