

## Negro Homes

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### BY BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

THE first Negro home that I remember was a log-cabin about fourteen by sixteen feet square. It had a small, narrow door, which hung on rusty, wornout hinges. The windows were mere openings in the wall, protected by a rickety shutter, which sometimes was closed in winter, but which usually hung dejectedly on uncertain hinges against the walls of the house.

Such a thing as a glass window was unknown to this house. There was no floor, or, rather, there was a floor, but it was nothing more than the naked earth. There was only one room, which served as kitchen, parlor, and bedroom for a family of five, which consisted of my mother, my elder brother, my sister, myself, and the cat. In this cabin we all ate and slept, my mother being the cook on the place. My own bed was a heap of rags on the floor in the corner of the room next to the fireplace. It was not until after the emancipation that I enjoyed for the first time in my life the luxury of sleeping in a bed. It was at times, I suppose, somewhat crowded in those narrow quarters, though I do not now remember having suffered on that account, especially as the cabin was always pretty thoroughly ventilated, particularly in winter, through the wide openings between the logs in the walls.

I mention these facts here because the little slaves' cabin in which I lived as a child, and which is associated with all my earliest memories, is typical of the places in which the great mass of the Negro people lived a little more than forty years ago; and there are thousands of Negro men and women living to-day in comfortable and well-kept homes who will recognize what I have written as a good description of the homes in which they were born and reared.

Probably there is no single object that so accurately represents and typifies the mental and moral condition of the larger proportion of the members of my race fifty years ago as this same little slave cabin. For the same reason it may be said that the best evidence of the progress which the race has made since emancipation is the character and quality of the homes which they are building for themselves to-day.

In spite of difficulties and discouragements, this progress has been considerable. Starting at the close of the war with almost nothing in the way of property, and with no traditions and with little training to fit them for freedom, Negro farmers alone had acquired by 1890 nearly as much land as is

contained in the European states of Holland and Belgium combined. Meanwhile there has been a marked improvement in the character of the Negro farmer's home. The old, one-roomed log-cabins are slowly but steadily disappearing. Year by year the number of neat and comfortable farmers' cottages has increased. From my home in Tuskegee I can drive in some directions for a distance of five or six miles and not see a single one-roomed cabin, though I can see thousands of acres of land that are owned by our people. A few miles northwest of Tuskegee Institute, in a district that used to be known as the "Big Hungry," the Southern Improvement Association has settled something like over fifty Negro families, for whom they have built neat and attractive little cottages. During the first six years nearly all of these settlers have paid for their houses and land from the earnings of their farms.

The success of this experiment has helped to improve conditions throughout the county. Similar results have obtained at Calhoun, Alabama, where a somewhat like experiment has been tried.

What I have said in regard to the condition of the people in the neighborhood of Tuskegee is equally true of Gloucester County, Virginia, where the influence of Hampton has been much felt. My friend Major R. R. Moton of the Hampton Institute writes:

In traveling over some fifty miles of Gloucester County last May, visiting schools and farms of the colored people, I did not see a single one-room house occupied by colored people. Not only that, but the houses of the colored people, I might add, were for the most part either painted or whitewashed, as were the fences and outbuildings. While, on the other hand, in a travel of about eight miles in York County, which is separated from Gloucester County by the York River only, I counted as many as a dozen dilapidated one-room dwellings of colored people. The reason of this is due largely to the influence of the fifty or more graduates and former students who have settled in Gloucester County, while York County has not been touched by the former students and graduates of Hampton Institute.

At Mound Bayou, Mississippi, in the center of the Mississippi-Yazoo delta, where the Negroes outnumber the whites sometimes as high as ten to one, a Negro colony, founded by Negroes, has come into possession of thirty thousand acres of land, and has built a Negro town in which, during the twenty years of its existence, no white man has ever lived. Another and large Negro town has grown up at Boley, Indian Territory, within the last five years, where all business, schools, and town-government are in the hands of Negroes, most of them from the farms and country towns of northern Texas, Arkansas, and Mississippi.

With regard to the progress made by Negroes in the cities we have less complete and definite information. But the number of those who possess homes, particularly in the Southern cities, is, I am convinced, much larger than most people, even those who are best informed, are aware. And this progress has been made for the most part in recent years, for after emancipation the freedmen did not at once understand the importance of acquiring property and building homes. They have had to learn that, as they have had to learn, in the first forty years of freedom, so many other simple and elementary principles of civilization.

I remember that the Reverend W. R. Pettiford, President of the Alabama Penny Savings Bank at Birmingham, Alabama, told us in one of his reports at the National Negro Business League that when he began his campaign among the miners and laborers of that region, before he could induce them to save money he had first to convince some of them of the necessity of giving up the loose connections in which they had been accustomed to live in slavery, and to establish permanent family relations for the benefit of their children. Many of these people who had been living together for years were ashamed to go through the legal form of marriage: it was a sort of acknowledgment that they had been in the wrong. It was only after their responsibility to their children was explained to

them that they could be induced to do so. Others were led to take the step through the influence of the church, or were drawn to it by the growing strictness in such matters of the community in which they lived.

So an increasing number of Negro homes has gone along with an increasing sense of the importance of the safeguards which the home throws about the family, and of the household virtues which it encourages and makes possible.

In every Southern city there is a Negro quarter. It is often merely a clutter of wrecked hovels, situated in the most dismal and unhealthy part of the city. A few years ago there might be two or three of these quarters, but there was very little choice between them. They all had the same dingy, dirty, and God-forsaken appearance. These are the places that

are still usually pointed out as the Negro homes. But in recent years there have grown up, usually in the neighborhood of a school, small Negro settlements of an entirely different character. Most of the houses in these settlements are still modest cottages, but they are clean and neat. There are curtains in the windows, flowers in the gardens, the doorways are swept, there is a little vine growing over the porch, and altogether they have a wholesome air of comfort and thrift.

If you should enter these homes, you would find pictures on the walls, a few books on the table, and an atmosphere of self-respect and decency which is conspicuously absent in the other quarters to which I have referred. These are the homes of a thrifty laboring class, usually of the second generation of freedmen. You would find, if you should inquire, that the owners had all had some education. Many of them have gone through colleges or an industrial school, or at least are sending their children there; and if you should inquire at the places where they are employed, you would learn that they were steady, thrifty workmen, who had won the entire respect of their employers. Many of them were perhaps born and reared in the dingy hovels to which I have referred. Many of them had come originally from farms, and, after leaving school, have settled permanently in the city.

In these same communities, however, you will frequently find other homes, larger and more comfortable, many of them handsome modern buildings, with all the evidences of taste and culture that you might expect to find in any other home of the same size and appearance. If you should inquire here, you would learn that the people living in these homes were successful merchants, lawyers, doctors, and teachers. There is nothing picturesque about these dwellings, and nothing to distinguish them from any other houses of the same class near-by; they are not usually recognized as Negro homes.

Now, the fact is, that white men know almost nothing about the better class of Negro homes. They know the criminals and the loafers, because they have dealt with them in the courts, or because they have to collect the rents from the places in which they congregate and live. They know to a certain extent the laboring classes whom they employ, and they know something, too, of the Negro business men with whom they have dealings; but they know almost nothing about the doctors, lawyers, teachers, and preachers, who are usually the leaders of the Negro people, the men whose opinions, teaching, and influence are, to a very large extent, directing and shaping the healthful, hopeful constructive forces in these communities.

In the course of my travels about the country I have had the opportunity to visit the homes of many of the people of this influential class. I have talked with them, by their firesides, of their own personal struggles. I have had opportunity to learn of their difficulties, temptations, aspirations, and mistakes, as well as to counsel and advise with them in some of the common undertakings in which we were engaged.

If it were possible, I should like to describe in detail some of the homes that I have visited, and to tell some of the histories that I have heard, because most that has been written about the Negro race in recent years has been written by those who have looked upon them from the outside, so to speak,

and have seen them merely through the dull, gray light of social statistics. It is my experience that a house is like a face: it is not difficult to perceive and feel the subtle influences that find expression there, but it is hard to describe them. But I can make here only a few random notes upon my own impressions; I must leave to a poet like the late Paul Laurence Dunbar, and to a novelist like Charles W. Chestnutt, the task of telling the new thoughts that are now stirring in plantation cabins, or the ambitions and struggles of the men and women who have gone out from them to win success in the bigger world outside.

One of the most beautiful and interesting homes with which I am acquainted is that of W. H. Lewis, Special Assistant to the United States District Attorney at Boston. Mr. Lewis lives in Cambridge. His home is on Upton Road, one of the many pleasant avenues of that beautiful university city. The house itself was designed especially for Mr. Lewis, who has chosen to put the entrance rather near the street, in order to give more room and privacy for the fine lawn at the back. On

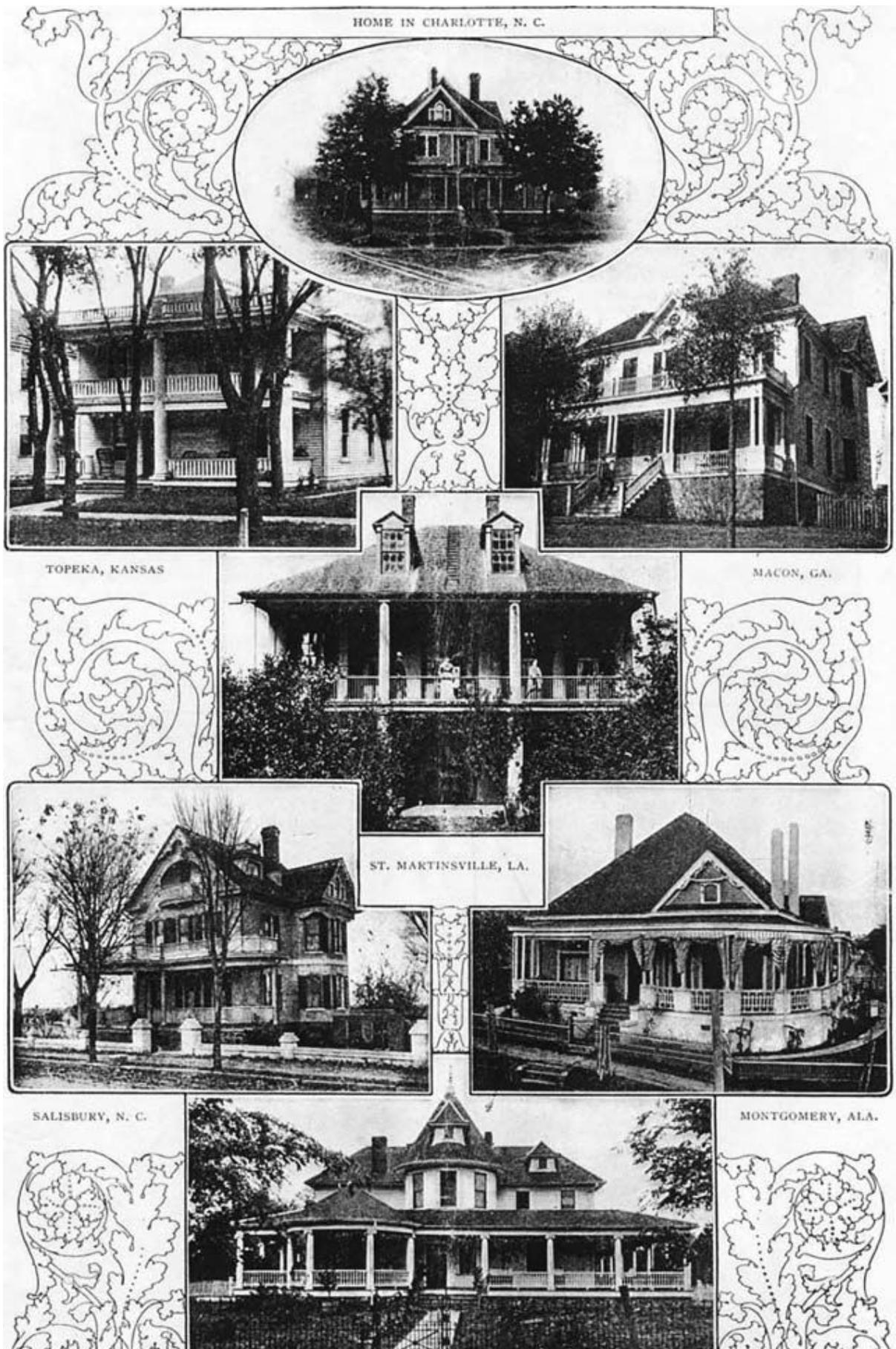
the rear porch, looking out across the lawn, the family sometimes have their meals in summer. The interior is designed with all the ingenuity and taste that have made modern houses models of comfort and convenience, and is at once large enough to be airy, and snug enough to be warm. Mr. Lewis is extremely fond of old furniture, and he has many trophies to show for his prowls among the antiquaries. I might mention also that in the library and study, which is the place which he regards as particularly his own, Mr. Lewis has a good collection of the books which concern the history of his race, and other races, and the walls are hung with the portraits of the men, both black and white, who have distinguished themselves by service to the Negro race. Mr. Lewis was born in Virginia thirty-nine years ago. Both his father and mother had been slaves, and he got his early education in the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute, a school for colored youth. As a boy he peddled matches along the wharves at Portsmouth, Virginia, and in one way or another he made his way until he was able to enter Amherst College. While he was in Amherst he was captain of the foot-ball team. He won the Hardy Prize Debate and the Hardy Prize Oration, and at his graduation, in 1892, was chosen class orator. He was graduated from the Harvard Law School in 1895. During all this time he made his own way, working at various occupations which chance offered. He worked for a time, during this period, as a waiter in Young's Hotel, Boston. After his graduation he began the practice of law. He was three times chosen representative from Cambridge to the legislature, and was finally appointed, in 1903, to the position of United States District Attorney. Such, in brief, is the history of one of the more successful of those who are sometimes referred to in the South as the "new issue."

The limits of this article will not permit me to describe at the same length the homes of Dr. Samuel G. Elbert of Wilmington, Delaware; of Professor William S. Scarborough of Wilberforce, Ohio; nor that of A. D. Langston of St. Louis, Missouri, all of whom are, like Mr. Lewis, men of scholarly attainments, whose homes reflect the best influence of modern American life.

Dr. Elbert, who was graduated from the Harvard Medical School in 1891, and after several years' experience, first as interne, and then as assistant resident physician, at the Freedman's Hospital in Washington, completed his medical education by a three years' graduate course at the Medical School at the University of Pennsylvania, is still a zealous student, and has collected a private library of some 5000 volumes. Professor W. S. Scarborough, who is the head of the department of Greek at the Wilberforce University, is author of a Greek textbook and a member of a number of learned societies to whose proceedings he is a valuable contributor. Mr. A. D. Langston, who is the son of the Hon. John Mercer Langston, the only colored man ever chosen from the State of Virginia as United States representative, is, as his father was before him, a graduate of Oberlin College. He has been for the larger part of his life a teacher, and is at present the head of the Dumas School at St. Louis, Missouri, where he is doing valuable work for the education of his race.

A Negro home very different from any of these is that of Paul Chretien, who owns a large plantation of 360 acres two miles from St. Martinsville, in St. Martin's Parish, Louisiana, Mr. Chretien's father was a Creole Negro who made a fortune before the war raising cattle on the low and swampy prairies of southwestern Louisiana. When he died, he left each of his children, three boys and two girls, 360 acres of land, and to Paul he gave the quaint and beautiful country place in which he lived. It was a vast, roomy structure of brick and wood, with a wide gallery across the front, and a porch set into the building at the back. The house stands in the midst of a large garden in which flowers and fruits blossom and bear in tropical profusion. Side by side with such fruits as Northern people are familiar with, grow oranges and figs, which lend an air of luxuriance to eyes accustomed to soberer Northern landscapes.

Among the other Negro homes that I have visited, which have preserved either in their exterior or interior something of







WILMINGTON, DEL.



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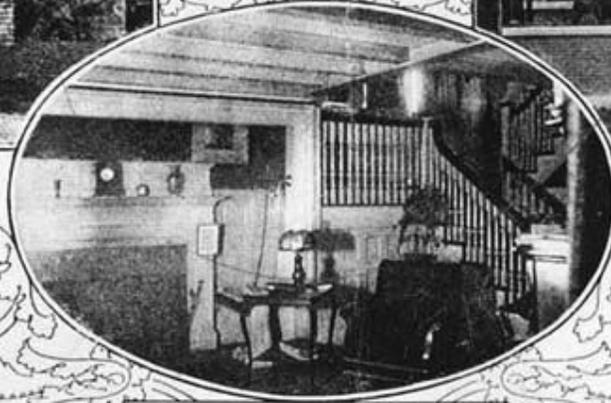
WILMINGTON, DEL.



CAMBRIDGE, MASS.



ST. LOUIS, MO.



CAMBRIDGE, MASS.





the quality of the old Southern mansion, I might mention those of Bishop Elias Cottrell at Holly Springs, Mississippi; A. J. Wilborn of Tuskegee, Alabama; John Sunday of Pensacola, Florida; G. E. Davis of Charlotte, North Carolina; and that of Nicholas Chiles of Topeka, Kansas.

Bishop Cottrell, who will be remembered among the Negroes of Mississippi for the useful and courageous work he has done and is doing for Negro education in that State, has served the Colored Methodist Church of Mississippi in one capacity or another since 1875, and has been a bishop since 1894. A. J. Wilborn, a graduate of the Tuskegee Institute, is a merchant in Tuskegee, where he was born a year before the breaking out of the war. He was one of the first students of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. At the present time he owns one of the best business blocks in the town, and does a large and profitable business, particularly among the farmers in the surrounding country.

Professor G. E. Davis has been for twenty-one years a teacher in Biddle University at Charlotte, North Carolina. I quote the following passage from a letter from Mr. Davis because it illustrates one of the curious family traditions -where there were family traditions -that have been handed down to the new generation from the days of slavery.

My mother's father was born free. His father, a native Scotchman, was a man of means, and left my maternal grandfather considerable wealth, entirely in gold coins, in strong iron chests. My maternal grandfather's wife, and consequently his children, were slaves, with a kind master. The father and husband hired the entire time of his wife and all his children, ten in number, and gave his sons the trade which he followed -mason and plasterer -and the girls the refining influence of a Christian home.

I might add that the struggle for freedom which his ancestors began, Mr. Davis has faithfully and honorably continued, adding to the hard-won freedom his father gained that other freedom that comes of economic independence, knowledge, and discipline.

John Sunday was a wheelwright before the war; then he became a soldier, and was afterward a member of the Florida legislature. Since then he has been in business. He tells me that in 1906 his total taxes amounted to \$1079.45. He has eight sons and two daughters, all of whom he educated at his own expense. Three of them went to Fisk University, and two of his sons are physicians.

Nicholas Chiles conducts a newspaper in Topeka, Kansas. He made his money, however, in real estate. Turned adrift, like many Negro boys after the war, to shift for himself, after years of aimless wanderings and adventure he attracted attention some years ago by buying a house in the same block with the Governor's mansion, and making of it a beautiful home.

An interesting fact with regard to the home of W. H. Goler of Salisbury, North Carolina, is that he built it almost wholly with his own hands. Mr. Goler learned the trade of mason at Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he was born. He recalls that he worked at a later period on the old Adelphi Theater Building in Boston, -afterward the store of Jordan & Marsh, -and that when the men employed there refused to work with a Negro, he organized a gang of Negro bricklayers to take the place of the men who struck on that account. It was from the money he earned as a bricklayer in Boston that he was able to pay his way through Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, which he entered in 1873 at the mature age of twenty-seven. He completed his collegiate course there in 1878, and three years later was graduated from the theological department. After two years as pastor of a church at Greensboro,

North Carolina, he became a teacher at Livingston College, where, in addition to his other work, he superintended the industries of the college and, with the help of the students, made the brick and laid the walls of most of the college buildings. He is now president of that college.

J. H. Phillips was born on the "Carter Place," a few miles from Tuskegee. He studied at Hampton Institute, and went from there to the Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. He has a beautiful home in Montgomery, which, he informs me, is insured for \$7500.



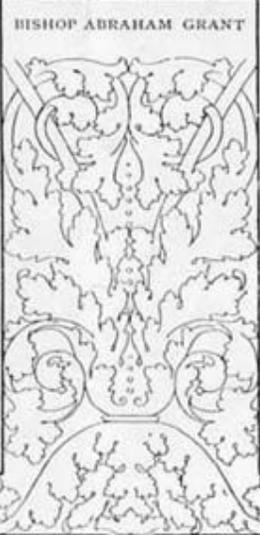
JACKSONVILLE, FLA.



BIRMINGHAM, ALA.



COLUMBUS, GA.



BISHOP R. S. WILLIAMS





Mr. Phillips once said to me:

In building and furnishing our home, we may have been a little extravagant; but the homes in which we were born and reared were neither ceiled nor plastered, the walls were without pictures, our beds without springs, and the kitchen was without a stove. On the floor there was no matting, or carpet, except a burlap sack I used to stand upon on cold mornings. We are trying to make up, my wife and I, for all we missed in our childhood.

I have room to say but little of the wonderful career of Bishop Abraham Grant, who was born in an ox-cart while his mother was being carried home from the slave-market; was himself sold for \$6000, Confederate currency, during the war; and has since traveled over a large part of the world -through Europe, Africa, and the West Indies -largely in the interests of his church. Bishop Grant's present residence is in Kansas City, Kansas, although his home, as he says, is in Indianapolis.

I can only mention the names of Bishop R. S. Williams of the Colored Methodist Church, whose home is in Augusta, Georgia; and Bishop G. W. Clinton of the Zion African Methodist, who lives at Charlotte, North Carolina; C. W. Hadnott, a contractor and builder of Birmingham, Alabama; and Andrew M. Monroe, who has been for many years collector for the Merchants' National Bank at Savannah, Georgia, -men whose homes, if less pretentious than some others I have named, still have about them, in a more than usual degree, the cheerful, wholesome atmosphere of a home.

One of the most imposing Negro residences of which I know is that of Dr. Seth Hills of Jacksonville, Florida. Dr. Hills is still a young man, and has been singularly favored by fortune and unusually successful in his profession. His father, a very practical man, who was at the same time preacher and carpenter, set him at an early age to learning the cigar trade. It was with this trade that he supported himself for the most part during the years he studied at Walden University, and afterward at the Long Island Medical College of Brooklyn, New York. While there he was fortunate enough to make friends who helped him to complete his education there and abroad. His home is one of the many handsome Negro residences of Jacksonville.

There are other Negro physicians whose homes attracted me; among them are Dr. C. S. Swan of Columbus, Georgia, and Dr. Richard Carey of Macon, Georgia. Dr. Carey was graduated from Howard University, studied afterward in New York, and in Vienna, Austria. Since his return from Europe he has confined his practice almost wholly to diseases of the eye, ear, nose, and throat. I might mention also the names of J. M. Hazelwood, S. W. Starks of Charleston, West Virginia, whose residences are as handsome and complete as any that I know, and Dr. Ulysses Grant Mason of Birmingham, Alabama, who, after completing his course at Meharry Medical College, Nashville, went abroad in order to take a special course in surgery at the Royal Hospital of Edinburgh. In 1895 Dr. Mason was elected to the position of assistant city physician, a post not held before that time by a colored man.

There are other Negro homes that are quite as deserving of notice as any that I have mentioned. I have written of those that have come in my way, and they have served the purpose of this article, which has been to throw some new light on the deep and silent influences that are working for the upbuilding of the Negro people in this country.

The average person who does not live in the South has the impression that the Southern white people do not like to see Negroes live in good homes. Of course there are narrow-minded white people living in the South, as well as in the North and elsewhere; but as I have gone through the South, and constantly come into contact with the members of my race, I am surprised at the large

numbers who have been helped and encouraged to buy beautiful homes by the best element of white people in their communities. I think I am safe in saying that the sight of a well-kept, attractive home belonging to a Negro does not call for as much adverse comment in the South as it does in Northern States.

The fact is that human nature is pretty much the same the world over, and economy, industry, and good character always bring their rewards, whether the person concerned lives in the North or in the South.