

FIFTY YEARS OF NEGRO PROGRESS

Some Indisputable Evidence

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[A few days before he died Booker T. Washington wrote to the Editor of THE FORUM suggesting the printing of an article dealing with "the definite, indisputable facts relating to the Negro's progress as a race," and enclosing some pages in which he said he had "indicated very roughly such an article." There is so much of interest and significance in the article, in the figures gathered and interpreted by Dr. Washington, and in the implications of an increasing development of the Negro race, that the Editor of THE FORUM feels justified, now that Dr. Washington's work is done and he cannot write the article he desired to write, in printing the notes in which he "very roughly indicated such an article."—EDITOR.]

EVERY little while some one announces decision that Negroes are making no progress along this or that line; and the conclusions of those who assert that they are, are disputed with great vigor and earnestness. It is the purpose of this article to indicate certain directions in which, in my opinion, Negroes have made progress in such measure as to forestall rational dispute.

TWO KINDS OF NEGRO PROGRESS

There is really but one kind of Negro progress; but the subject is often discussed as if there are two; or, perhaps, I had better say that persons frequently confuse other elements with the subject, and speak of the progress which white persons have made in their treatment of Negroes when they mean to speak of the real progress made by the Negro himself. For example: If one should go into the Negro quarters in a number of the cities where the race is found in largest numbers and note the unsanitary conditions that are largely prevalent, and then go into

the white residential sections in the same cities and compare the two, he should be likely to conclude that the Negroes are making no progress in sanitation; when, as a matter of fact, the conditions in the Negro sections are largely due to the fact that city officials do not extend to them the enforced sanitary measures which would be vigorously demanded by the voting white residents, if neglected or withheld. The equal extension of sanitary measures to large Negro residential sections by municipal authorities is progress of white people in their treatment of Negroes; while progress in matters of personal hygiene on the part of colored people is real Negro progress; and it is of this latter that I wish to write here.

WHITE MAN'S CIVILIZATION THE STANDARD OF MEASUREMENT

In testing Negro progress, the white man's civilization is to be the standard of measurement. A recognized authority (The Americana Encyclopædia) states that "Civilization . . . is commonly applied to the upward movements of peoples toward higher intellectual, moral, social, and industrial altitudes." The question which we are to answer, then, is: What indisputable progress has the Negro made during the past fifty years along intellectual, moral, social, and intellectual lines?

PROGRESS TOWARD LITERACY

In setting down the Negro's intellectual progress during the past fifty years, one need not sermonize—the bare recital of the facts will be eloquent and convincing enough. Emerging from slavery, the Negro was not more than 5 per cent. literate—perhaps 95 per cent. of his number was illiterate. The census of 1910 shows that by that year he had reduced his illiteracy to 30.4 per cent., a reduction of 64.6 per cent. Comparing Negro illiteracy with that of the world's population, ten years of age and over, we have this showing:

Negroes—	Per Cent. Illiterate	—30.4%
Bulgaria—	“ “ “	—65.5
Greece—	“ “ “	—57.2

	Per Cent.	Illiterate	
Hungary—			—40.9
Italy—	“	“	—48.2
Poland—	“	“	—59.3
Portugal—	“	“	—73.4
Russia—	“	“	—70.0
Servia—	“	“	—78.9
Spain—	“	“	—58.7
Chile—	“	“	—49.9
Cuba—	“	“	—56.8
Mexico—	“	“	—75.3
Porto Rico—	“	“	—79.6
India—	“	“	—92.5
Philippine I.—	“	“	—55.5
Cape of Good Hope—	“	“	—65.8
Egypt—	“	“	—92.7

If the Negro had done no more good than lead Greece and Italy in the matter of literacy, his showing would have been profoundly significant.

SOCIAL AND MORAL PROGRESS

WEALTH

In reviewing the Negro's social and moral progress, we shall examine his wealth statistics first, since, according to the Encyclopædia Britannica, "The economic interpretation is the most searching interpretation of history at its every stage." As an index, in part, to his economic status, the wealth statistics are illuminating.

We have not the figures for all of the Negro's wealth; but the Federal Census Bureau has just released a document which gives the value of the Negro's *farm property, alone*, as one billion one hundred and forty-two million dollars (\$1,142,000,000). This sum represents \$116.20 per capita for each Negro in the United States.

If one will turn to the statistics of the wealth of the nations of the world, as represented by money in 1911, he will find that with the exception of Argentina, whose money wealth is \$135 per capita, the Negro's per capita wealth is more than twice that

of any nation on earth. Or if we examine the reports of the United States Immigration Commission for 1910, we shall find that the Negro's farm wealth gave him a higher wealth rating per capita than was shown by the immigrants of any nation entering the United States for the period 1899-1903; and higher than the rate for all immigrants—\$21.57.

I know this is not the most refined method of making the comparisons, according to statistical practices; but it furnishes a rough method of judging whether the Negro is standing still; and if every comparison thus made were vitiated, it would still remain true that for a race which was itself the property of another race in 1860, a wealth of \$1,142,000,000, accumulated by the former slaves during the subsequent fifty years, is progress without question.

Negroes operated 893,370 farms in 1910, having an acreage of 42,279,510. The value of these farms increased 128.4 during the ten-year period 1900-1910, alone.

CHURCH AND SCHOOL PROPERTY

A conservative estimate of the value of the property of the 550 Negro churches owned in 1863 would be about one million dollars. By 1906, the number of churches and halls for religious services had increased to 36,421, the value of the church buildings alone being \$56,636,159. Counting his church buildings, halls and parsonages, the Negro has invested upward of sixty and one-half millions of dollars in church property. This is not only economic progress, but it denotes, also, a continuing and increasing devotion to his religious life.

While it is possible to sever the value of schools owned entirely by Negroes from that of schools not so owned, the significant statement to be made touching the wealth of Negro schools is that during the fifty years of their freedom, Negroes have contributed more than \$24,000,000 toward their own education and the property held by schools for their race. This is progress along economic lines and toward self-respect.

PROPERTY OF FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS

To the preceding totals, we must add the property owned by fraternal or secret societies among Negroes. It is estimated that all these societies own, together, property valued at between nine and ten millions of dollars. Here again we have economic progress, to which must be added the ability, proven, to organize and direct affairs.

BUSINESS PROGRESS

I have been much impressed, in my connection with the National Negro Business League, with the showing which Negroes have made in business sagacity and success. Starting in 1863 with about 2,000 business enterprises, the Negro has developed in fifty years some 43,000 business concerns, with an annual volume of about one billion dollars. After we charge against his business account all the failures which he has made in this line, we must still confess that there can be no dispute as to his progress in business.

In connection with this, it should be stated that he has made enough progress in business to warrant the establishment of 57 banks operated by colored people, with a capitalization of \$1,600,000, and which do an annual business of about \$20,000,000.

A RISING STANDARD OF LIVING

That the Negro's standard of living has increased is also beyond question. This is capable of proof in two very direct ways. The first is in the ownership and improvement of his home.

While the difference between the number of homes owned by Negroes in 1863—9,000—and that owned in 1913—550,000—may not be an entirely sufficient proof of progress in home ownership, the ten-year period, 1900-1910, indicates that there is an upward tendency in the matter of home ownership. In

the Southern States alone, the proportion of Negro homes which were owned free from encumbrances, rose from 20 per cent. in 1900 to 22.4 per cent. in 1910. Add now to this conclusion the definite statement of the Census Bureau that there has been a decidedly upward movement in the matter of home ownership and this subject may be closed.

If I were not writing of incontestable proofs of progress, I would set down the fact, known to all students of the American Negro, that the latter's standard of living, as expressed in the purchase of books, papers, music and musical instruments and all other visible sign of prosperity, is continually rising. Even on the farm, where the majority of Negroes live, the race increased the value of its farm implements by 81.2 per cent. during 1900-1910, proof that the Negro is buying more and improved farm implements.

The second proof of a rising standard of living is offered by the recent widespread legislation to prevent Negroes from purchasing property in desirable localities. That Negroes wish to live in better neighborhoods and are so financially able to purchase property in them as to make legislation necessary to prevent it, is proof enough to the contention offered under this head.

HEALTH PROGRESS

I can do no better than to indicate progress toward better health conditions among Negroes than to point to the findings of the Census Bureau for 1910. While I had no means of knowing that the crusade being waged by educational and religious organizations for the conservation of Negro life and health would bear fruit so soon, I felt certain, as I went about the country and noted the substantial improvement being made in home ownership and private sanitation, that progress was being made. Comes now the Census Bureau with the statement that the Negro has decreased his death rate in a registration area, embracing 19.7 per cent. of the Negro population, by 3.9 per cent. in the short period of ten years—1900 to 1910.

NEGRO'S CARE OF HIS OWN PAUPERS

I think I will not be accused of making rash statements if I say that very largely Negro paupers are excluded from the almshouses of the United States. In the twelfth census, an enumeration of paupers in almshouses was made and the results compared with statistics of pauperism for 1880 and 1890. It was shown that in 1880 white persons contributed 91.4 per cent. of all paupers enumerated and colored persons contributed 8.5 per cent.; in 1890, whites were 91.1 per cent. and colored persons were 8.9 per cent.; and in 1903, white persons were 91.5 per cent. as against 8.5 per cent. for colored people. And yet colored persons were 13.5 per cent., 12.2 per cent., and 12.1 per cent. of the population, respectively, for the years 1880, 1890, and 1900; while white persons were 86.5 per cent., 87.8 per cent., and 87.9 per cent., respectively, for the same years.

Under these circumstances one would naturally expect that the streets and country would be full of Negro beggars, practically in view of the fact that the Negro was practically a pauper himself when he was made a freeman. But that is not so. One of the finest evidences of progress toward independence and self-respect is found in the fact that, during all the years since slavery days, the Negro has so faithfully cared for his poor that there are fewer Negro paupers to be found in public institutions than is true of the races which are bountifully cared for by public and private charity.

SIGNS OF MORAL PROGRESS—CHURCH STATISTICS

Moral progress cannot be measured by statistics; but certain statistics are indicative of definite tendencies. For instance: If we examine the census returns for the period 1890-1906, it will be seen that while the Negro population increased but 26.1 per cent., during the time, the number of church organizations increased 56.7 per cent.; the number of church members increased 37.8 per cent.; church buildings, 47.9 per cent.; and the value of

church property, 112.7 per cent. In addition to this it is significant that, while only 79 per cent. of all church organizations in the United States reported Sunday Schools, 91.2 per cent. of all Negro religious organizations reported such schools.

It is difficult to escape here the conclusion that Negroes have not only not lost their interest in religion, but that their interest is increasing. To-day, there are 40,000 churches in which they offer their devotions and renew their spiritual life—churches which are their own property.

MARITAL CONDITION

In the same way, the Census Reports on the Marital Condition of Negroes have indicated a hopeful sign for the race. Whatever moral weaknesses may be charged against the Negro, whatever interpretation may be put upon the marriage and divorce statistics of the race, it must be admitted that the proven tendency of Negroes to enter wedlock and to refuse to remain permanently single is, when viewed broadly, indicative of a tendency toward social health. That more Negroes marry than whites, and that fewer of the former remain single, are facts set forth by the Census Reports and made the subject of special comment.

INDUSTRIAL PROGRESS

If the economic interpretation of a race's history is the most searching, it is also correctly said that "the industrial factor is everywhere the most powerful factor in civilization" (*Encyclopædia Britannica*). Where does the Negro stand in American industry?

The census of 1890 gave the first comprehensive data about Negro occupations. It is not possible in this article to make a detailed comparison of progress in each industry, but a broad view of the subject may be had from the following table:

Percentage of Negroes in Principal Occupations in 1890 and 1910.

	1890	1910
Agriculture	59.6%	55%
Professions	1%	1%
Domestic and Personal Service.....	28%	21%
Trade and Transportation.....	4%	8%
Manufacturing and Mechanical Pursuits.....	6%	13%

The most important change noted is in a decrease of the preponderance of Negroes in agriculture and domestic and personal service, and an increase in the numbers that are engaged in trade and transportation, and in manufacturing and mechanical pursuits, the numbers engaged in the latter occupations practically doubling within twenty years. This is especially significant because it betokens an increase of skill on the part of colored people, and shows that in spite of general beliefs, and the more general opposition of trade and labor unions to the admission of Negroes into the skilled industries, and the black man is opening the door to these industries for himself, not by any appeal to race or color, but upon the ground of efficiency. This is progress unmistakable, and no refinements of statistical juggling can seriously vitiate this conclusion.

If it be asked what his progress has been in agriculture, the occupation in which the largest proportion of the race is engaged, it is enough to reply that during the ten-year period, 1900-1910, Negroes increased the value of all their farm property 128.4 per cent.; of their live stock 117.7 per cent.; their implements and machinery 81.2 per cent.; buildings 131.6 per cent.; and of their land 133.2 per cent. It is seen, then, that although the percentage of Negroes engaged in agriculture in 1910 is smaller than it was in 1890, the Negroes remaining in this industry have measurably increased their efficiency.

ADAPTATION TO NORMAL REQUIREMENTS OF AMERICAN PROGRESS

It must not be forgotten that the Negro's general progress is to be measured, in a way, by his ability to meet the normal requirements of American progress. In its final report, the United States Immigration Commission suggested that the tendency of a race toward Americanization or assimilation into the

body of the American people is measured by that race's tendency to acquire citizenship, to learn the English language and to abandon native customs and standards of living. I submit in all sincerity that, if these are tests, the American Negro has made wonderful progress toward meeting them during the past fifty years.

When we examine the Negro's tendency to acquire citizenship, or, rather, to qualify for citizenship, it is found that the Negro has been so anxious to secure this boon that legislation has been found necessary to prevent it; and, despite this latter fact, no requirements set for admission to citizenship, save that of color, have been so rigid that he has not been willing and able to meet them. Contrast this with the finding of the Immigration Commission to the effect that the newer immigrant races, because of language considerations, difficulty, expense, increasing rigidity of requirements, and uncertainty of residence in the United States, show little desire to qualify for citizenship in this country.

In the matter of language, the Negro speaks the English mother tongue with facility; and I have shown that his standard of living is continually rising and his customs are those of his white neighbors about him.

PROGRESS "AGAINST THE WIND" IS GREAT PROGRESS

The progress made by the American Negro during the past fifty years has been largely in the face of obstacles. Other races are objects of special and helpful State and Federal aid in many directions, but that is not true of the Negro. The aid to white farmers through the Smith-Lever law is a case in point. With the exception of our own good state of Alabama, which took the lead in the matter, and of Virginia and South Carolina, no Southern state has made provision by which Negro farmers may benefit under this law.

CONCLUSION: NEGRO'S PROGRESS IS TOWARD A CIVILIZATION OF EFFICIENCY AND NOT A SUPERIORITY OF FORCE

The progress of the world seems to be toward greater physical power—power to rule others by force and greater power to sweep aside all objection and opposition to this rule of might.

Often I feel proud that I belong to a race in America which can never hope to be superior to the races about it in physical power; but whose growth must be in matters of the spirit and the ever-increasing success which attends such growth. American conditions are making the Negro into the most efficient workman; and the habits of self-control, of making the most of little opportunities and privileges, and the rapidly growing determination of the colored people to be broad in spirit and conduct toward those who misuse them, are making the Negro into that fine type of citizen who may yet become the conservator of the finest and best of real civilization.