

The Negro and Illiteracy

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PERHAPS the most important single fact which the census has brought to light in regard to the negro in America is contained in the figures which show the progress of the race during the last ten years in learning to read and write. At no period in their history has so large a proportion of the negro people succeeded in gaining the sort of freedom that comes with the opportunity to live by and with the printed page.

There seems to be a pretty general agreement among people thruout the world that the black man, at the time of his emancipation, was, so far as education was concerned, at the bottom. Forty-eight years ago, when Abraham Lincoln made us free, there were, perhaps, 3, certainly not more than 5, per cent. of the freedmen who were not wholly illiterate. The census figures just published show that at the present time 69.5, practically 70 per cent., of the colored people of the United States can both read and write. In 1900 there was still 44.5 per cent. of the negro population of the country who were illiterate; now there remains only a little more than 30 per cent.

Compared with the American white man, both in the Northern and the Southern States, the negro, not only in respect to general education, but in his ability to read and write, is still far behind. The figures show that in 1900, 6.2 per cent. of

the white people in the United States were still unable to read and write. In 1910 this percentage was reduced to 5. In the Southern States the illiteracy among the white race has been reduced from 11 per cent. in 1900 to 8 per cent. in 1910. Still more interesting are the figures for the immigrant white population. Among the foreign whites the number which could neither read nor write was in 1900 12.9 per cent., and in 1910 12.8 per cent. These figures indicate that, while the native white population has decreased its illiteracy 1.6 and the foreign white population has decreased its illiteracy only about one-tenth of 1 per cent., the illiteracy among the negro population has decreased 14 per cent.

The significance of these figures will appear, however, when they are compared with statistics showing the conditions among people in other parts of the world in somewhat the same stage of development as the black man in America. In Cuba, for example, 59 per cent. of the people cannot read and write; in Spain, 68 per cent.; in Russia, 77 per cent.; in Portugal, 79 per cent.; in Brazil, 80 per cent. Within forty-eight years the American negro has reduced his illiteracy by 67 per cent. It should be noticed, too, that the people named above are not aliens in their country.

One of the most interesting facts

brought out by these figures is that the negro seems to be making greater progress in those parts of the country where he has less opportunities than in other parts of the country where he has greater opportunities. For example, illiteracy among the colored people in Delaware decreased 12.5 per cent. in the years between 1900 and 1910. In Maryland the decrease was 11.7; in West Virginia, 12 per cent.; in Kentucky, 12 per cent. In the District of Columbia, where negroes have perhaps the best public school facilities of any place in the world, the illiteracy of the race decreased 10.8 per cent. In the following four Southern States, where the public school facilities are, as a rule, poor, it appears that so far as the mere matter of learning to read and write is concerned, negroes are making more rapid progress than in any other part of the country. For example, the decrease in illiteracy between the years 1900 and 1910 was 15.7 per cent. in North Carolina; 15.19 per cent. in Georgia; 16.6 per cent. in Arkansas, and 17.3 per cent. in Alabama.

I do not mean to say that this is an entirely fair comparison, but it does show that the one way to inspire the negro with an ambition and a determination to get an education is to let him know that some one in the community is opposed to letting him have it.

It is a great thing for the people who have been slaves to have gained possession for themselves, in so short a time, of one of the fundamental tools of civilization. We should not, however, be deceived by figures which indicate that a little more than two-thirds of the negro population are able to read and write. Races, like individuals, may be able to read and write and be little better off than they were before, so far as concerns the fundamental things of life. Few people understand the enormous handicap under which the negro labors in his efforts to get an education of any kind, and few people also appreciate the sacrifices which the progress thus far made has cost the masses of the negro people. I do not believe that the best white people of the South realize how little of the school funds, which is supposed to be distributed equally among the races according

to the number of children of school age, ever reaches the negro schools, and I am sure they do not realize to what extent the money which is actually expended upon negro education in many parts of the South is wasted.

In Elizabeth City County, Virginia, for example, there are 2,200 white children of school age and 2,300 colored children of school age. These negro children have had twenty teachers to give them instruction during the past year, while the white children have had forty-nine teachers. The negro children have had school buildings costing \$5,000, while the white children have had school buildings which cost \$62,000. The salaries of the twenty negro teachers amounted to \$4,000, while the salaries of the forty-nine white teachers amounted to \$23,000.

Much has been said from time to time about the schools in the South for the higher education of the negro. Few people either in the North or the South realize, however, to what extent these institutions, which are supposed to be for the higher education of the negro race, are merely doing the work which should be done by the public schools. Of 189 schools of which we have statistics, in which negroes are supposed to get higher education, nearly 57 per cent. of the pupils are in the elementary grades and only 5 per cent. are getting what is commonly called a college education.

Not only is the negro not getting a college education to any such extent as most people believe, but in too many cases he is not getting anything in the schools that is worthy of the name of education. I can best give an idea of the conditions that prevail in some parts of the South in the words of one of the recent reports made by the Superintendent of Schools for South Carolina.

In his last annual report the State Superintendent of Education in that State speaks thus concerning the deplorable condition of the negro public schools:

"The education of the negro in South Carolina is in the hands of the white race. The white trustees apportion the funds, select the teachers and receive the reports. The county superintendent has the supervision of these schools in his hands. We have expended this year \$348,834.60 in the support of negro

schools. I never visit one of these schools without feeling that we are wasting a large part of this money and are neglecting a great opportunity. The negro school houses are miserable beyond all description. They are usually without comfort, equipment, proper lighting or sanitation. Nearly all of the negroes of school age in the district are crowded into these miserable structures during the short time which the school runs. Most of the teachers are absolutely untrained and have been given certificates by the county board not because they have passed the examination, but because it is necessary to have some kind of a negro teacher. Among the negro rural schools which I have visited, I have found only one in which the highest class knew the multiplication table. In South Carolina we have simply turned over a portion of the school fund to the negro schools, and expect the most ignorant teachers of the State, without any suggestion or directions, to adapt to the special needs of the negro schools a course of study and text books designed primarily for the white children.

"The negro tenant is now, and will be for years to come, the tenant farmer of South Carolina. His welfare and the prosperity of the white race depend largely upon his efficiency as a farmer. I believe that the time has now come for us to attack the negro school problem with a serious intention of adapting the schools to the special needs of the negro farmer in an endeavor to teach him agriculture, to encourage manual training, cooking, sewing, personal cleanliness and hygienic conditions in his home, along with the elements of a common school education. The schools should endeavor to set for him a better standard of living, and increase those ever-present and insistent wants which enter about a well-kept home, and thus secure for him a better existence and for the land owner a more constant labor supply. This problem has not yet been solved, and the "well done" of the whole South awaits the county superintendent and trustees who will attack it vigorously."

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the negro, as the census figures I have quot-

ed show, is making progress. He is learning, like the Jew, to make education a part of his religion. More and more every year the schoolhouse is taking its place alongside of his church as the center of thought and interest.

Every year the amount of money contributed by the negro to his own education thru churches and other organizations grows larger. A fair estimate makes the sum of these contributions by negroes to negro education since emancipation not less than fifty million dollars. There is to my mind no better evidence of the fact that the money which has been put into negro education in the South has, in spite of all the deficiencies of the negro schools, been well invested than the fact that thru this education the negro is learning to help himself.

There has been and there still is prejudice against negro education in the South, but every year the number of thinking men in the Southern States who realize that the only practical solution of the negro problem of the South is the education of the negro race is increasing.

Let me add in conclusion that, in my opinion, there is at the present time no place in this country where money could be invested to such advantage as in assisting the members of both races in the South who are seeking to inspire and direct the movement, which has already begun to build up, not a single school here and there or a single college, but a practical, adequate and efficient system of negro education in the Southern States.

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