

The Negro as a National Asset

W. E. Burghardt DuBois, Ph. D., New York City

I. As a Laborer

WHEN the reader of this magazine seeks a career for his son and daughter, he recoils from any occupation which involves a large amount of manual toil and he does not for a moment consider menial service. And yet, most workers of the world always have been and still are servants and laborers by an over-whelming majority. Despite our tremendous technical development, there is no reason to suppose that this fact will not be true for long years to come. Because we dislike manual labor and despise the servant, we can hardly expect that this nation should regard as an asset a mass of folk who have always been chiefly laborers and servants.

THE author of this article is a graduate of Fisk University, with three degrees from Harvard, has been professor of history and economics in Atlanta University, is the author of several books (among them *The Souls of Black Folk*), and is now connected with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

We must remember, however, that the black laborer in America has performed an unusual service. He has not only done the ordinary labor, incident to the industrial and social development of any country, but he has also performed that excess of toil which enabled this country to develop far faster than it would have ordinarily, and released from the necessities of hard toil enough of thought and genius to enable American economic development to do in 400 years what normally would have called for at least 1,000 years. The negro was not simply the slave of his white masters from 1500 to 1900 -he was the human sacrifice which between 1492 and 1850 laid the blood-covered foundation stones upon which was erected the structure of modern world commerce, with its kingdoms of tobacco, sugar, and cotton. With this hard toil went a poignantly human, personal service; loyalty and sacrifice for masters, and the care of children and the bearing of illegitimate children, the nursing of the sick, the defense of the helpless, and succor of the discouraged and the unfortunate.

If the American negro has piled up for America thousands of millions of dollars of wealth of which he has received no share, the negro servant made a spiritual contribution which it is impossible to estimate or to repay.

Nothing can present a clearer picture of the negro in industry today than the actual census figures. We present the figures of 1910 as those of 1920 are not yet available:

Negroes gainfully employed -1910

	Men	Women
Agriculture	1,842,537	1,051,137
Mining	62,671	84
Manufacturing and hand trades	575,845	81,285
Transportation	274,565	2,083
Business	123,635	8,384
Domestic and personal service	234,063	871,008
Public service	25,838	457
Professional service	39,400	30,071

Since 1910 great and decisive changes in negro industry have taken place: there have been large increases of negroes engaged in mining, manufacturing, transportation, business, and professions, and relative decreases among farmers and servants. Negroes are to-day the chief laboring

force in the Southern States and a growing proportion of the laboring force in the North.

Their work is not all confined to unskilled labor. As skilled artizans they have always had considerable place. During the days of slavery, negro mechanics did most of the skilled labor on the plantations and a good deal of that in cities. In New Jersey, for instance, in the eighteenth century, slaves were employed as miners, iron-workers, carpenters, and shoemakers. In Pennsylvania, in that day, competition between white and black mechanics was considerable. The number of negro artizans increased during the nineteenth century, and Olmsted in his journeys in the slave States found slave artizans everywhere. He declared that the mechanics whom he saw in South Carolina "exercised as much skill and ingenuity as the mechanics that he was used to employ in New England."

Above this, the negro has furnished inventors and men of great technical skill. Their dean was Benjamin Banneker of Maryland. He was one of the surveyors of the District of Columbia in 1791 and issued the first American almanac¹; he constructed a clock which was the mechanical wonder of his day. Other negro inventors have been James Forten, who amassed a considerable fortune from his apparatus for managing sails; and R. B. Lewis, who invented a machine for picking oakum which is still in use in practically the same form. An assistant examiner in the United States Patent Office found, in 1913, a record of more than 1,200 patents issued to colored men, 800 of which he was able to verify. Foremost among these were patents of Granville T. Woods in telegraphic and telephonic devices. Many of these were assigned to the General Electric Company and the American Bell Telephone Company. Elijah McCoy has over forty patents, and is the pioneer in the art of steadily supplying oil to running machinery so as to avoid the necessity of stopping the machine to oil it. His lubricating cup is used all over the world. W. B. Purvis invented machines for making paper bags; and J. H. Dickinson of New Jersey was one of the pioneers in pianoplayer mechanism. William Douglass of Kansas has various inventions in harvesting machines; and James Doyle of Pittsburg in automatic food-serving systems. Especially must be remembered Jan Matzeliger, a colored man born in British Guiana, who came to the United States to work as a shoemaker. He invented and patented the shoe-lasting machine which was purchased by the United Shoe Machinery company, and these basic patents are still the foundation of its work. This company consolidated forty-one smaller companies into a great industrial organization which controls shoemaking in the United States.

No nation in the world has a more willing laboring force or one which, on the whole, is more efficient than American negroes.

II. As a Soldier

WE may some day rise to the place where the refusal of a man to fight for his country or any one's else country will be counted to him for merit. In the past, however, we have rated a citizen's value, at least in part, by his willingness to fight as a soldier when called. This conception of duty has been recognized by the black man; and from the beginning of American history the negro soldier has played a large part in the defense of the country.

Colored soldiers fought in the colonial wars; some 5,000 of them were enrolled in the war of the Revolution; and the first man who fell in that war was a negro, the anniversary of whose death, the fifth of March, was the first American National holiday, and was so celebrated for five years. He was one of four victims who were deposited in one grave over which a stone was placed with the inscription:

"Long as in Freedom's cause the wise contend,
Dear to your country shall your fame extend,
While to the world the lettered stone shall tell
Where Caldwell, Attucks, Gray, and Maverick fell."

The anniversary of this event was publicly commemorated in Boston by an oration and other exercises every year until our national independence was achieved, when

the fourth of July was substituted for the fifth of March as the more proper day for a general celebration.

In this same war Haiti sent a contingent of 800 volunteers to save the American army at Savannah from destruction.

During the war of 1812 negroes formed a large proportion of those American sailors for whose impressment by the English the war was fought. Negro sailors were common on the privateers and fought with Perry and McDonough. Negro soldiers also fought especially at New Orleans where they were commended by Andrew Jackson:

To the Men of Color. -Soldiers! From the shores of Mobile I collected you to arms -I invited you to share in the perils and to divide the glory of your white countrymen. I expected much from you; for I was not uninformed of those qualities which must render you so formidable to an invading foe. I knew that you could endure hunger and thirst and all the hardships of war. I knew that you loved the land of your nativity and that, like ourselves, you had to defend all that is most dear to man. But you surpass my hopes. I have found in you, united to these qualities, that noble enthusiasm which impels to great deeds.

In the Civil War not only did thousands of negroes serve as laborers, servants, and spies, but 200,000 were enrolled soldiers -and as Abraham Lincoln said, without their help the war could not have been won. In the Spanish-American War, negro regiments in the regular army and in the volunteer army were not only conspicuous and indispensable, but their work as volunteers against yellow fever showed an even higher conception of duty and sacrifice.

In the recent World War negroes formed a larger proportion of the persons drafted than did the whites, according to their numbers in the population. They were indispensable as stevedores and laborers, and they furnished one whole division of soldiers and a part of another; in the last offensive against the Hindenburg line five negro-American regiments were in battle line and a division in reserve. They received many medals and citations.

It is to be hoped that never again will the United States be called upon to furnish citizens to take part in organized destruction and murder; but if the awful necessity does come, no men can be expected to do their duty better than black Americans.

III. As a Citizen

AS a citizen and voter, even more than as a soldier, the negro has served America and is serving. First of all, the revolt of the slave was one of the founding stones of democracy. The Maroons in the West Indies, especially in Jamaica, where they fought the concentrated might

of the British empire for more than two centuries, made it clear that the new democracy in America must take account of the man lowest down as well as the *bourgeoisie*. Slave revolts not only were common all through the West Indies and South America, but they were organized repeatedly in the United States from the sixteenth century down to Nat Turner's raid.

The influence of the West Indies on democracy in America was decisive. First, it was Haiti that first freed the slave, and Haiti at the critical moment made the emancipation of five South American democracies possible. Bolivar was twice furnished with arms, money, and men by Haiti at the time when his fortunes were lowest. Then, too, the great revolt led by Toussaint l'Ouverture and Dessalines forced Napoleon to sell Louisiana and the great Mississippi Valley to the United States for a song, and opened the way for democracy there.

The negro appeared as freeman and voter in the earliest days in many of the colonies, and in five of the thirteen colonies he was among the voters who adopted the present Constitution.

After the establishment of the cotton kingdom in the South about 1830, the revolt of the slaves took the form of organized running-away. This not only weakened the slave system in the South, but it was the prime cause of the abolition movement in the North, and one of the reasons for its early triumph. Negroes as well as whites cooperated in the "underground railroad," and persons like Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass were unanswerable arguments against slavery and tremendous methods of successful propaganda.

When emancipation came through the

They obeyed the Constitution of the United States and annulled the bonds of States, counties, and cities which had been issued to carry on the war of rebellion and maintain armies in the field against the Union. They instituted a public school system in a realm where public schools had been unknown. They opened the ballot box and jury box to thousands of white men who had been debarred from them by a lack of earthly possessions. They introduced home rule into the South. They abolished the whipping post, the branding iron, the stocks, and other barbarous forms of punishment which had up to that time prevailed. They reduced capital felonies from about twenty to about two or three. In an age of extravagance they were extravagant in the sums appropriated for public works. In all of that time no man's rights of person were invaded under the forms of law. Every Democrat's life, home, fireside, and business were safe. No man obstructed any white man's way to the ballot box, interfered with his freedom of speech, or boycotted him on account of his political faith.

In the case of a typical State, a former negro legislator in South Carolina said in the constitutional convention which disfranchised him:

We were eight years in power. We had built school-houses, established charitable institutions, built and maintained the penitentiary system, provided for the education of the deaf and dumb, rebuilt the jails and court houses, rebuilt the bridges, and re-established the ferries. In short, we had reconstructed the State and placed it upon the road to prosperity and, at the same time, by our acts of financial reform transmitted to the Hampton government an indebtedness not greater by more than \$2,500,000 than was the bonded debt of the State in 1868, before the Republican negroes and their white allies came into power.

And finally, as to the laws passed, we may quote this statement:

Reconstruction constitutions, practically unaltered, were kept in

Florida, 1868-1885

17 years

Virginia, 1870-1902 32 years

South Carolina, 1868-1895 27 years

Mississippi, 1868-1890 22 years

Even in the case of States like Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and Louisiana, which adopted new constitutions to signify the overthrow of negro rule, the new constitutions are nearer the model of reconstruction documents than they are to the previous constitutions.

In the emancipation of women, who now form a part of the recognized citizenship of the land, the negro woman has played a notable part. It is generally recognized that the full emancipation of women can come only with economic independence. Negro women, of necessity, have formed a body of independent workers from the time of slavery, when mothers worked side by side with fathers in the field. Since slavery, the demand for negro women as servants and laborers has usually exceeded the demand for colored men, and thus has made the colored woman equal co-supporter of the family. Out of this has arisen an economic independence which has had its influence upon the rest of the country. Moreover, the negro woman has had much to do with the break-down of the "doll" theory of womanhood. In the second Women's Suffrage Convention, held in 1859, much was made of the argument that woman was to be protected and cared for -the object of courtesies and attentions, and could not, for this reason, be allowed to enter political life. It was Sojourner Truth, the black Amazon, who shattered this argument with a few words:

Nobody ever helped me into carriages or over mud puddles or ever gave me a best place, but ain't I a woman? Look at me. Look at my arm. I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns and no man could head me, and ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man, when I could get it, and bear the lash as well, and ain't I a woman? I have borne five children and seen most of them sold off into slavery; and when I cried out with a mother's grief, nobody but Jesus heard me, and ain't I a woman?

To-day the negro citizenship of the United States, with all its ignorance and inexperience, can be depended upon for

a thorough understanding of the basic meaning of democracy and of justice toward the worker, decency toward women, education of children, and other fundamentals of American national life.

IV. As an Artist

THE negro has been and is primarily a laborer. He has fought as a soldier; he has done his duty as a citizen, but his great rôle in America is that of artist. He has given America its only native song. He has been the central figure of its native literature and he has given sensuous color and delight to its rather narrow esthetic life.

The greatest gift of the negro has been the negro folk song. I have said elsewhere:

Little of beauty has America given the world save the rude grandeur God himself stamped on her bosom; the human spirit in this new world has expressed itself in vigor and ingenuity, rather than in beauty. And so by fateful chance the negro folk song -the rhythmic cry of the slave -stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas. It has been neglected, it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the negro people.

The late Natalie Curtis Burlin wrote:

We of the white race are at last awakening to the fact that the negro in our midst stands at the gates of human culture with full hands laden with gifts. Too long in this country have we barred the door. . . . We now learn that the black man's contribution to the industrial development of our land is an essential economic factor, so we have but to unlock the gate to see that he can be equally important to culture evolution in the "melting pot" of the United States, and that his presence among us may be a powerful stimulus to the art, music, letters, and drama of the American continent.

Through the negro this country is vocal with a folk-music intimate, complete, and beautiful. It is the negro music with its by-product of "ragtime" that to-day most widely influences the popular song-life of America, and negro rhythms have indeed captivated the world at large. Nor may we foretell the impress that the voice of the slave will leave upon the art of the country -a poetic justice, this! For the negro, everywhere discriminated against, segregated and shunned, mobbed and murdered -he it is whose melodies are on all our lips, and whose rhythms impel our marching feet in a "war for democracy." The irresistible music that wells up from this sunny and unresentful people is hummed and whistled, danced to and marched to, laughed over and wept over, by high and low and rich and poor throughout the land. The down-trodden black man whose patient religious faith has kept his heart still unembittered is fast becoming the singing voice of all America. And in his song we hear a prophecy of the dignity and worth of negro genius.

One chapter of our earlier musical history is often forgotten:

From the free negroes of Louisiana there sprang up during slavery days a number of musicians and artists who distinguished themselves in foreign countries, to which they removed because of the prejudice which existed against colored people. Among them was Eugene Warburg, who went to Italy and distinguished himself as a sculptor. Another was Victor Sejour, who went to Paris and gained distinction as a poet and composer of tragedy. Another by the name of Dubuclet was a physician and musician of Bordeaux, France. The Lambert family, consisting of seven persons, were noted musicians. Richard Lambert, the father, was a teacher of music, Lucien Lambert, a son, after much hard study became a composer of music. He left New Orleans, however, and went to France, where he continued his studies. Later he went to Brazil, where he engaged in the manufacture of pianos. Among his compositions are: "La Juive," "Le Depart du Conscript," "Les Ombres Aimées," "Le Niagara." Another brother, Sidney Lambert, stimulated by the example and fame of his father and brother, made himself a name as a pianist and a composer of music. He wrote a method for piano of such merit that he received a decoration in recognition of his work from the king of Portugal. At last accounts he was a professor of music in Paris. Edmind Dede, who was born in New Orleans in 1829, learned while a youth to play a number of instruments. He was a cigar-maker by trade and, being of good habits and thrifty, accumulated enough money to pay his passage to France. He took up a special study of music and finally became director of the orchestra of L'Alcazar, in Bordeaux, France.

With the folk-song and out of Spanish-America came the negro dancing which has gone all over the world; and on this music and dancing has been reared the modern syncopated music. Beyond this there is beginning to appear a noble superstructure of song and symphony; we have only to note names like Harry Burleigh, Coleridge Taylor, and Nathaniel Dett to bring these facts home to us. In literature, the negro has figured as a subject

to be written about by authors like Emerson, Whittier, Lowell, Whitman, Stowe, Cable, and Page; and as one who out of a wonderful wealth of experience is beginning to interpret himself to the world. Negro folk-lore has been published by Joel Chandler Harris, and his work rimes and songs are preserved by Thomas W. Tally.

There is a regular negro literature beginning back in the eighteenth century and developed by negro writers down until to-day. Some of them are read only by negroes; others like Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Booker T. Washington, Benjamin Brawley, and William Stanley Braithwaite are known to the nation. On the stage the negro has given the world Ira Aldridge, who deserves to be bracketed with the great Rachel and Sarah Bernhardt as one of the few great actors of the world. More lately, we have seen Bert Williams and Charles Gilpin. Negro minstrelsy has been developed by negroes and others and then transformed into a new musical comedy which is gaining increased vogue.

Out of all this, the real negro theater is beginning to appear. Negro players in serious drama were on Broadway before the war; and the theater movement is carried on to-day at Howard University and in Chicago.

One of the greatest painters produced by America is Henry O. Tanner, the son of a negro bishop, who is to-day dean of American artists in Paris. He has been followed by Scott and Harper, and some young sculptors are beginning to work. Naturally, the full day of the negro artist has not dawned -he is still too near his problem: his experience is too poignant, his life too tragic, his poverty too real, to leave him the leisure and detachment which the artist demands. But there can be no doubt of the great natural gift, the emotional worth, and the marvelous experience which lies in this group, ready for the touch of the master hand.

V. As a Christian

IF one should ask you how many persons in the United States are seriously trying to practise the ethics of Jesus of Nazareth -the number would not be large. There can be no doubt as to the worth and organization of our churches, but there is tremendous doubt as to their practical effort to practise the Golden Rule and realize human brotherhood. In these matters the American black man occupies a singular place. First of all, he himself as a group exemplifies Christian ethics to an astonishing degree; he represents the meek and lowly; he has been "slow to wrath and plenteous in mercy." He has attempted, on a scale seldom equaled before in a civilized community, to forgive his enemies and turn the other cheek.

The great crusade of Booker T. Washington has never been fully evaluated by most white folk. Booker T. Washington wanted social equality, wanted the right to vote, wanted education of the highest kind; but he thought it could only come through sacrifice. He tried to say to the American people: "We surrender our votes, our self-respect, and our right to learn at your behest, and to keep only the right to work for you. And we do this with the hope and belief that in turn, you will give back to us, and indeed, force upon us, everything that we offer to sacrifice." It was a magnificent offer and it failed because white people could not rise to the grandeur of its conception. They took every advantage of its surrender and gave nothing adequate in return. They crystallized the surrender of political activity into disfranchising laws; they stifled the possibility of social intercourse by "Jim Crow" enactments; and they cut down education by starving the colleges and public schools and giving only half-hearted support to industrial education. The project failed then, but the failure was not the negro's.

In other respects the negro has been an example to Christians. His church is not a closed institution. It is a church of the people; and while, as such, it reflects little of dignity and often is spoiled by low moral standards, it does reflect the life of the people and it serves the every-day toiler.

As I have written elsewhere:

At first sight it would seem that slavery completely destroyed every vestige of spontaneous social movement among the negroes; the home had deteriorated; political authority and economic initiative were in the hands of the masters; property, as a social institution, did not exist on the plantation; and,

indeed, it is usually assumed by historians and sociologists that every vestige of internal development disappeared, leaving the slaves no means of expression for their common life, thought, and striving. This is not strictly true; the vast power of the priest in the African state has already been noted; his realm alone -the province of religion and medicine -remained largely unaffected by the plantation system in many important particulars. The negro priest, therefore, early became an important figure on the plantation and found his function as the interpreter of the supernatural, the comforter of the sorrowing, and as the one who expressed, rudely but picturesquely, the longing and disappointment and resentment of a stolen people. From such beginnings arose and spread with marvellous rapidity the negro church, the first distinctively negro American social institution. It was not at first by any means a Christian church, but a mere adaptation of those heathen rites which we roughly designate by the term obe worship, or "Voodooism." Association and missionary effort soon gave these rites a veneer of Christianity, and gradually, after two centuries, the church became Christian, with a simple Calvinistic creed, but with many of the old customs still clinging to the services. It is this historic fact, that the negro church of to-day bases itself upon the sole surviving social institution of the African fatherland, that accounts for its extraordinary growth and vitality. We easily forget that in the United States to-day there is a church organization for every sixty negro families. This institution, therefore, naturally assumed many functions which the other harshly suppressed social organs had to surrender; the church became the center of amusements, of what little spontaneous economic activity remained, of education, and of all social intercourse.

In 1916 the United States census gave these figures of negro churches:

Independent Negro Denominations

Denominations Baptist Bodies:	Churches	Members	Sunday-schools	Scholars	Value of Church Prop.
Baptist National Convention	21,113	2,938,579	20,099	1,181,270	\$41,184,920
Colored Free Will Baptists	170	13,362	90	4,168	178,385
Colored Primitive Baptists	336	15,144	88	3,201	154,690
Church of God and Saints of Christ	94	3,311	57	1,526	43,746
Churches of the Living God:					
Church of the Living God	28	1,743	27	491	23,875
Church of the Living God (Christian Workers for Fellowship)	155	9,626	99	2,238	78,955

Church of the Living God (General Assembly)	10	266	10	168	12,700
Evangelistic Associations:					
Voluntary Missionary Society	4	855	4	386	4,000
Free Christian Zion Church of Christ.	35	6,225	35	3,411	35,900
Methodist Bodies:					
African Methodist Episcopal	6,636	548,355	6,277	311,051	14,631,792
African Methodist Episcopal Zion	2,716	257,169	2,544	135,102	7,591,393
Colored Methodist Protestant	26	1,967	24	920	52,733
Union American Methodist Episcopal	385	21,000	305	15,000	28,500
African Union Methodist Protestant	58	3,751	49	2,813	205,825
Colored Methodist Episcopal	2,621	245,749	2,543	167,880	5,619,862
Reform Zion Union Apostolic	47	3,977	43	2,505	79,325
African Amer. Methodist Episcopal	28	1,310	6	200	6,280
Reform Methodist Union Episcopal	27	2,196	25	699	35,500
Congregational Methodist Evangelist Missionary Church					
Presbyterian Bodies:					
Colored Cumberland Presbyterian	136	13,077	139	7,471	230,426
Total	34,625	4,087,662	32,464	1,842,517	\$70,198,807
Negro Members, White Denominations	6,375	579,960	5,403	333,157	17,009,570
Grand Total	41,000	4,667,622	37,867	2,175,674	\$87,208,377

The first consecrated bishop in America was a black man; and black men have the right to say that they have founded here the only real Christian church open to all men and willing to serve all men. And however imperfect the organization may be, it certainly points a tremendous moral.

¹ According to *The New International Encyclopaedia*, Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* was begun in 1732.