

The Economics of the Negro Problem

When an economic status is once unsettled all things can happen. To the American slave's mind after emancipation came the realization that slavery was not inevitable or divine, and masters found that they could live and make money with "free Negroes." There ensued the slow but mighty oscillation which sought a new economic equilibrium. Possibly in this awful day of World War the battle simile will be most intelligible. The lines of economic onset stretched far and surged to and fro. The capitalists and landowners at the first onslaught retreated to serfdom and a nominal wage which was, all things considered, yielding little. The black workingmen turned their flank by the pushing forward of the house-servant and city artisan class. These artisans before the war had been used to hiring their own time, while the house-servants had some education. Both these classes were in position to take service with the highest bidder and artisans began to work on their own account.

The main line of landowners held at serfdom and peonage in agriculture but the flanks had to fall back before the house-servants and the artisans to a real wage system. The wages, however, were low and the lines of work for the artisan strictly limited. There are no figures earlier than 1890, but it seems probable that in 1880 at least 65% of the Negroes were still on the farms and 30% were servants. Moreover, a large part of this servant class was employed in rural districts. This leaves 5% or less of the colored people in all other kinds of work, and the development of this 5% is of greatest interest.

There are in the United States among Negro Americans breadwinners ten years of age and over. These are distributed as follows among the nine classes of occupations counted by the census:

| | |
|---|-----------|
| 1. Agriculture, forestry and animal husbandry | 2,893,280 |
| 2. Extraction of minerals | 1,129 |
| 3. Manufacturing and mechanical industries | 31,421 |
| 4. Transportation | 55,969 |
| 5. Trade | 19,491 |
| 6. Public service (not elsewhere classified) | 2,382 |
| 7. Professional service | 7,245 |
| 8. Domestic and personal service | 1,122,182 |
| 9. Clerical occupations | 19,336 |
| | 5,192,535 |

It is not easy to compare this division of labor with the past because of differing classifications. If we rearrange the classification of 1910 to coincide as nearly as possible with earlier censuses we have this division:

Occupations of American Negroes (Estimated)

| | 1880 | 1890 | 1900 | 1910 |
|---|------|------|-------|-------|
| Agriculture | 65% | 57% | 53.7% | 55.5% |
| Domestic and personal service | 30% | 31% | 33 % | 21 % |
| Manufacturing and mechanical industries | | | | |
| Trade and transportation | | | | 7.8% |
| Professions | | | | 2 % |
| Other occupations | 5% | 12% | 13.3% | |

This comparison is partly invalidated by the fact that in 1900 nearly a half million laborers were put in domestic and personal service, who in 1910 are distributed, mostly in agriculture and to some extent in other divisions, particularly in manufacturing and mechanical industries.

Admitting all difficulties of comparison these figures reveal vast economic changes in the colored group and in their relations with their neighbors.

The freedmen at first moved from farm labor to domestic service; then from domestic service to trades and professions. In the last decade there has come a counter movement, "Back to the Farm," and at the same time greatly accelerated movement into the trades and professions and into public service.

The Negroes on farms today form nearly as large a proportion of the Negro race as they did twenty years ago, and while the proportion as compared with fifty years ago has fallen from perhaps 70% to 55.5%, it remains numerically very large. Indeed, there are more Negroes on farms in the United States today than ever before. But this army of nearly three million dark farmers and farm laborers is differently constituted today than formerly. In 1890, for instance, there were among the Negro farmers 120,738 farm owners; in 1900, 187,797 farms were conducted by Negro owners; and in 1910, there were 218,972 such farms, containing nearly twenty million acres, an area almost the size of Ireland, and worth (with its farm property) over four hundred millions of dollars. In addition to these there were 264,443 tenants paying a cash rental which shows a considerable degree of economic independence. The other four hundred thousand metayers varied from peons to prosperous farmers.

Negro American Farmers

| | <i>Number</i> | <i>Per cent.</i> |
|--|---------------|------------------|
| 1890 1 | | |
| Owners | 120,738 | 21.7 |
| Tenants | 428,894 | 78.3 |
| Total | 549,632 | 100 |
| 1900 | | |
| Owners | 187,797 | 25.2 |
| Cash Tenants and Managers | 275,304 | 36.8 |
| Metayers | 283,614 | 38 |
| Total | 746,715 | 100 |
| 1910 | | |
| Owners | 218,972 | 24 |
| Cash Tenants, Mixed Tenants and Managers | 319,346 | 30.9 |
| Metayers and Unspecified | 355,052 | 44.6 |
| Total | 893,370 | 100 |

Value of Farm Property ¹

1900

Farmed by colored owners \$ 179,796,639

Farmed by colored tenants 366,926,869

Total \$ 546,723,508

1910

Farmed by colored owners \$ 440,922,439

Farmed by colored tenants 838,311,806

Total \$1,279,234,245

Land Owned by Negro Americans ²

Acres Sq. Miles

| | |
|--|----------------------|
| Lands in farms of colored owners and tenants | 46,632,305 or 72,862 |
| Land in farms of colored owners | 19,076,463 or 29,806 |
| Area of Great Britain | 89,018 |
| Area of Ireland | 32,373 |

The servant class among Negroes shows the profoundest changes. It is, undoubtedly, decreasing in size both proportionately and numerically. Of the million Negroes classed under domestic and personal service, half are servants and waiters and a third washerwomen. The other sixth might be classed with the business men or the skilled artisans, including, as it does, such classes as hotel keepers and barbers.

We may now turn to those departments already mentioned where the Negro as a slave received least training, and where he needs most to increase his proportion if he is to become a normal modern group. There were in 1910, 640,545 colored breadwinners in manufacturing and mechanical industries. This is the class of skilled artisans and more or less skilled workingmen. Over a quarter of a million are in the building and hand trades, 125,000 are working in lumber and furniture, 40,000 in iron and steel and 28,000 in clay, glass and stone.

The great increases in this work have come since 1900 in the saw and planing mills, tobacco factories, the dressmakers and seamstresses, the stationary engineers and firemen and particularly among the iron and steel workers.

Over 400,000 Negroes are in trade and transportation, which is a large increase over the number so engaged ten years ago.

Negroes in the professions and public service increased from less than 50,000 to over 100,000 in ten years. The largest group is formed by the 29,750 teachers, followed by 17,495 clergymen. After that, come 6,000 musicians, 3,000 actors, and 2,400 trained nurses. There are 1,000 physicians, 500 dentists, 800 lawyers, 700 artists and 800 charity workers. To these we must add 32,170 colored men who are in the civil service of the nation, state and city. There is some difficulty of comparison with the censuses here, but the discrepancy is apparently not large.

The increase of the Negro in trade is, perhaps, the most striking recent development. The number of colored people thus employed is 119,491, an increase of over 100% in the last ten years. There are 21,553 retail dealers, mostly conducting grocery stores, meat shops, coal and wood establishments. Over 56,000 are deliverymen and porters, and there are some 10,000 clerks and salesmen.

Turning our attention to the specific employments we have, first, the great groups where 100,000 or more are employed, led by the farmers and farm laborers with their 3,000,000 workers. Next come nearly 400,000 washerwomen and 230,000 cooks, followed by 200,000 general servants and 100,000 workers in saw and planing mills. Here we have three and three quarter millions of Negroes who represent the great mass of workers. Part of them, the farm laborers (the washerwomen and the servants) are the undifferentiated inheritors of the work of their fathers. Others like the farm owners and the workers in

saw and planing mills represent the new era of economic development. Beyond these, if we take groups of 25,000 to 100,000 we have in order of numbers, the laborers on steam railways; the truckmen, cabmen and hackmen; the waiters; the deliverymen; the teachers, porters; tobacco factory hands; the workers in water transportation and street construction; and the carpenters and coal miners. This accounts for all but a million of the five million and more colored breadwinners.

Another way of appreciating the work of this group is to separate them according to the position they occupy in their work rather than according to the kind of work which they do. This, the census of 1910 enables us to do roughly for the first time. We may thus divide the colored breadwinners into seven classes. First, there are something over three quarters of a

million persons who can be classed as owners, officials, managers and persons working on their own account. Professional men are here included, but not the government clerks; farmers paying a cash rental are included but not the share tenants. Next come 200,000 persons of which 30,000 belong to the clerical class and 175,000 are skilled artisans. Below the skilled artisans come over 400,000 workingmen who may be classed among the semi-skilled, although on account of the uncertainties of the census it is a little difficult to know just what grade of work these do. Next would come 300,000 skilled servants: butlers, waiters, nurses, etc., who require some skill above ordinary servants. At the bottom of this economic pile we would put, first, 730,000 servants and washerwomen, and last, two and one-half million common laborers. Among these latter, however, are probably one or two hundred thousand who belong at least among the semi-skilled, but have been carelessly reported.

In other words, it would seem that fifty years after emancipation a little less than 12% of the Negro group had reached economic independence either through the ownership of capital or professional training. Among these are 218,972 farm owners, over 20,000 retail dealers and 6,000 capitalists and managers of manufacturing and other enterprises, and 20,000 capitalists in various sorts of personal service. To these may be added next, nearly a million people whose skill and experience give them a fairly assured place in the economic world. At the bottom are those three and one quarter millions of common laborers: servants and washerwomen who for the most part work hard and at low wages and must stand the vicissitudes of the crowded unskilled labor market.

Occupations According to Status

| | |
|--|---------|
| Owners of land and businesses, cash tenant farmers, managers, officials and professional men | 614,868 |
| Skilled artisans and clerks | 207,218 |
| Semi-skilled workers | 411,509 |

| | |
|--------------------------|-----------|
| Other tenant farmers | 399,528 |
| Upper servants | 303,295 |
| Servants and washerwomen | 731,140 |
| Common laborers | 2,524,977 |
| Total breadwinners | 5,192,535 |

Two things were significant about the general status of the breadwinners among colored people in 1910. First, the fact that so large a proportion of the colored population were at work. There were 7,317,922 colored people ten years of age and over in the United States in 1910. Of these 71% were breadwinners as compared with 48.4% of the native whites and 60.3% of the foreign-born whites. This for the Negro is a larger per cent. than in 1900 and while it may be, as the census report of 1910 suggests, that the proportion of breadwinners is exaggerated by the inclusion of housewives on Southern plantations, yet, it is without doubt true that no portion of the people of the United States is so largely employed as the Negroes.

The second noticeable thing about these occupations of colored people was the degree to which women were workers. Of the colored women 54.7% were at work as compared with 17.1% of the native white women. Half of the two million colored women who work, are on the farms, and 850,000 are servants, laborers and washerwomen. In the majority of cases these occupations of women are auxiliary occupations to help the man of the family who is the main breadwinner. This is particularly so on the Southern farms where the tenant's contract usually provides for the work of his wife and children. It is also the case in cities where servants and women laborers are working to eke out the family income. There are also over 100,000 colored women in other branches of work, including 68,000 in manufacturing and mechanical industries, and 30,000 in public and professional service.

Since 1910, the most significant economic development among Negroes has been a large migration from the South. This has been estimated to have involved at least 250,000 and is still going on.

As to the reasons of the migration, undoubtedly, the immediate cause was economic, and the movement began because of floods in middle Alabama, and Mississippi and because the latest devastation of the boll weevil came in these same districts.

A second economic cause was the cutting off of immigration from Europe to the North and consequently wide-spread demand for common labor. The U. S. Department of Labor writes: "A representative of this department has made an investigation in regard thereto, but a report has not been printed for general distribution. It may be stated, however, that most of the help imported from the South has been employed by railroad companies, packing houses, foundries, factories, automobile

plants, in Northern States as far west as Nebraska. At the present time the U. S. Employment Service is not cooperating in the direction of Negro help to the North."

The third reason has been outbreaks of mob violence in northern and southwestern Georgia and in western South Carolina.

These have been the three immediate causes, but back of them is, undoubtedly, the general dissatisfaction with the conditions in the South.

A colored man of Sumter, S. C., says: "The immediate occasion of the migration is, of course, the opportunity in the North, now at last open to us, for industrial betterment. The real causes are the conditions which we have had to bear because there was no escape."

These conditions he sums up as the destruction of the Negro's political rights, the curtailment of his civil rights, the lack of the protection of life, liberty and property, low wages, the Jim Crow car, residential and labor segregation laws and poor educational facilities.

The full economic result of this migration and its extent in the future cannot be forecast at the present writing, but the chances are that the demand for labor caused by the European war will result in a large rearrangement of Negro laborers and accelerate all tendencies in the distribution of that labor along lines already noted.

Figures like these are beginning to place the so-called Negro problem beyond the realm of mere opinion and prejudice. Here we see a social evolution working itself out before our eyes. The mass of the freedmen are changing rapidly the economic basis of their social development. They have not given up their close connection with the soil, but they are changing its character tremendously, so that today a fourth of them are peasant proprietors. They are forcing themselves into the trades despite the long opposition of white labor unions. As small business men, purveying principally to their own group, they are gaining a foothold in trade. As more or less skilled employes, they form a considerable part of our transportation system and they are rapidly developing a professional class which serves its own group and also serves the nation at large.

Many indications of the effect of this new development are seen in the peculiar incidence of racial prejudice. We hear today less argument about Negro education and more about sumptuary laws to control Negro expenditure, freedom of movement and initiative and residence. Politically handicapped, as the colored man is, he is learning to wield economic power which shows that his political rights cannot long be held back. And finally, in the division of his occupations, there is evidence of forethought and calculation within the group which foreshadows greater cooperation for the future.

Since writing the above there has been a series of important economic happenings involving the American Negro which ought to be noted.

Severe floods and the cotton boll weevil reduced Negro tenants in many parts of the lower South to great distress during the winter following the declaration of war. They sold their cotton at a low figure or had none to sell. When the price of cotton rose the plantation owners reaped the benefit and immediately began plans for the next season, calculating on labor at an unusually low price.

Meantime, a great foreign immigration of common laborers was cut off by the war and there arose in the North an unusual demand for common labor. The Negroes began to migrate. In eighteen months 250,000 left the South and moved into the North. They were chiefly attracted by wages which were from 50 to 200% above what they had been used to receiving. And they saw also a chance to escape the lynching and discrimination of the South.

Every effort was made by the South to retain them. They were arrested wholesale, labor agents were taxed \$500 to \$1,000 or more for licenses, and the daily press of the South began to take on a more conciliatory tone. A slow rise in wages has begun. The migration of Negroes, however, continues since the demand continues. It is probable that not for a generation after the close of the war will there be any great immigration to the United States from Europe. In that case the American Negro will have a chance to establish himself in large numbers in the North. We may look for migration of two or even three millions.

To offset this the labor unions have used every effort. The argument was that these blacks kept down the rate of wages. Undoubtedly they did keep wages from rising as high as they otherwise would have, but if they had been received into the unions and trained into the philosophy of the labor cause (which for obvious reasons most of them did not know) they would have made as staunch union men as any. They are not working for low wages because they prefer to but

because they have to. Nine-tenths of the unions, however, are closed absolutely against them either by constitutional provision or by action of the local unions. It is probable, therefore, that the friction will go on in the North. East St. Louis has already been echoed at Chester, Pa., and in other industrial centers.

Thus, in his effort to escape industrial slavery, murder, riot and unbelievable cruelty has met the Negro and this not at the hands of the employers but at the hands of his fellow laborers who have in reality common cause with him.

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1 Including 3% of Indian and Mongolian farmers.

2 In 1890 farm owning families were counted; since then farms conducted by owners, etc. This makes a small discrepancy.