

The National Negro Business League

SOME INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT THE COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL RISE OF THE NEGRO AS SHOWN BY THE RECENT MEETING AT RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

BY

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THE National Negro Business League has justified its existence as a stimulus to the race in commercial activity. The third annual meeting, held in Richmond, Virginia, late in August, was attended by Negro business men from almost every State east of the Mississippi River, and some from States which lie still farther west. Every one of the common business occupations was represented, and many that are less common. Women as well as men are members of the League and come to its meetings. Some of the most interesting experiences have been related by Negro business women, and some of the most encouraging reports made by them. The success of the organization from the first has been most gratifying. Indeed, the fact that the Negroes of the United States, barely thirty-five years out of slavery, should have become engaged in business to an extent that suggested the formation of a national business organization is, in itself, a cause for gratification.

The machinery of the League is very simple. Any Negro man or woman who is engaged in any business is eligible for membership upon the payment of an annual fee of two dollars. It is desirable, however, and it is recommended, that local leagues be formed to co-operate with the central body to extend its influence in their own fields; and in many cases this has been done - in places as far

distant from each other as Boston, Pensacola, Chicago, Richmond, and Little Rock, Arkansas. Over three thousand persons are now in touch with the central organization through these local leagues.

For several years previous to the formation of the Business League, as my work in connection with the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute had taken me about the country, both North and South, I had been surprised and encouraged to find so large a number of Negro men and women as I did find engaged in some business occupation. It is true that these enterprises were usually small -sometimes very small -and in general with small amounts of capital invested. It seemed to me interesting that they existed at all, and encouraging that they increased from year to year in number, variety and importance. As I spoke of this to other men of our race in various parts of the country, I found that they agreed with me that a national organization which should bring together Negroes from all parts of the country engaged in business, for the purpose of advising with one another, would be a source of beneficial encouragement and inspiration. A meeting was called, to be held in Boston in August of 1900, at which a National Negro Business League was organized. Last year's meeting was held in Chicago, under the auspices of the Cook County Negro Business Men's League, and this year's meeting was held in Richmond, Virginia, by invitation of the local league in that city. The list of officers of the National League, elected at Richmond for the coming year, shows in a measure from how wide an area its membership is drawn: President, Booker T. Washington, Tuskegee, Alabama; First Vice-President, R. H. Boyd, Nashville; Second Vice-President, W. O. Murphy, Atlanta; Third Vice-President, Charles Banks, Clarksdale, Miss.; Recording Secretary, Edward E. Cooper,

Washington; Corresponding Secretary, Emmett J. Scott, Tuskegee, Alabama; Treasurer, Gilbert C. Harris, Boston. The fourth annual meeting of the league is to be held next year in Nashville.

The annual meeting of the League occupies three days, two sessions being held each day. From the first, an effort has been made to have the meetings as practical as possible; in the place of many formal addresses and papers to have men and women who have succeeded in some kind of business tell how they went to work to do this -tell how they began, what obstacles they had to meet, and how they overcame these obstacles. For instance, one of the most interesting speakers at Richmond was Mr. A. C. Howard, of Chicago, who now manufactures \$10,000 worth of shoe polish a year, and who told how, as a Pullman car porter, he began to experiment in the making of a shoe polish which would be more satisfactory than that which he was then using, trying the results of his experiments at night on the shoes of the passengers sleeping in the berths of his car. In the same way, Mr. Samuel Harris, of Williamsburg, Virginia, told how he went to that place in 1870 and opened a barber shop, with an ice cream room as a side investment. From this he has developed a general mercantile business of \$50,000 a year, employing thirteen clerks. The store of Mr. Harris does a larger business than that of any other person in the town; he operates a sawmill and a brickyard, and is a heavy stockholder in the bank of the town and in a knitting mill there. Mr. R. B. Hudson, of Selma, Alabama, told how he had begun life as a school teacher, but becoming dissatisfied with the financial returns of that occupation, decided to go into business. He started a coal and wood yard with \$75 capital and a mule and cart. Now he has seven carts, mules and drivers, four choppers, and an office force, and last year did a business of \$9,000. He reported a kindly interest and patronage from white residents of the city, and said that he had recently sold two hundred and fifty tons of coal to a large white corporation there.

With each successive meeting of the League there has been shown an encouraging improvement in the class of men and women who attend and in the conduct of the meetings themselves. The calling of the first meeting was something of an experiment. The persons who attended came hardly knowing what to expect; and I think that as a general thing the business men who came to that meeting from various parts of the country were surprised to find that there were so many of themselves as were there represented. Each meeting since then has seen the addition to the organization of more men, and men of solid business worth. The meetings of the

League will now compare favorably with those of any similar organization. In fact, I think that the meeting of the National Negro Business League at Richmond was a surprise to Richmond, just as Richmond was a surprise to some of the Northern and Eastern members of the League. On the third day of the session two prominent white citizens of Richmond were overheard discussing the League in a surprised and very gratifying manner. "It just beats me," one man said. "It's different from any Negro convention I ever knew before. As a general thing the Negroes who come to conventions wear tall hats and long coats and gold spectacles, and carry canes, and stand on the sidewalks. These fellows go along about their business. Some of them are mighty well dressed, but I haven't seen a tall hat on one of them." What this man said reminds me of the recent public statement of the Chief of Police of Atlanta, just after five thousand Negroes met in that city to attend the Young Negro People's Christian Congress, early in August. As I remember it, he said that he never knew so large a company of people to assemble in Atlanta and require so little attention from the force of which he is the head.

The meeting in Richmond was the first to be held in the South. Among the Northern and Eastern men and women were some who had never been in the Southern States before, and others who had not been there since childhood. From my own observation, and from very general conversation, I am sure there was nothing in connection with the stay of the delegates in Richmond to mar their pleasure in the visit or to detract in any way from the highest success of the affair. This was thoroughly appreciated by all present. The League particularly appreciated, too, -and with reason, -the courteous and constant attention which the press of the city gave to its meetings and the generous amount of space devoted to reporting its proceedings.

Important as the annual meetings of the League are, of course the chief value of the organization lies in the general influence which it shall be able to exert. The development of interest in the movement in the State of Arkansas is typical of what had been done in other States. When the League was established, in Boston in 1900, one man only came from Arkansas to attend the meeting -Mr. George E. Jones, an undertaker of Little Rock, one of the most successful colored business men of the State. Mr. Jones went home from the Boston meeting so enthusiastic and so impressed with the importance of the work for good which the League could be made to do, that as a result of the interest which he aroused in Arkansas there are now active local leagues at Little Rock, Hot Springs, Pine Bluff, Texarkana and Fort Smith. The Little Rock league has forty-two members. These local leagues hold regular meetings, usually once a month, at which questions are discussed which pertain to the business interests represented by the members. In addition, public meetings are held to which the public in general is invited and at which topics of general interest are taken up. In spite of the fact that the League has been deprived of the services of its first active member in Arkansas by death within the last year, the increase in the work of the organization in that State is still going on.

A careful study of the Negro in business in the United States, made by Professor W. E. B. DuBois for the Atlanta Conference in 1889, showed the following generalizations, and the reports of the Business League make it seem reasonable to believe that there has been a steady development since then:

Capital under \$100	16
\$100 to \$500	312
\$500 to \$1,000	415
\$1,000 to \$2,500	586
\$2,500 to \$5,000	183
\$5,000 to \$10,000	115
\$10,000 to \$50,000	45
\$50,000 and over	12
Total capital invested by these known cases, \$5,691,137.	

Dr. DuBois says: "Compared with the immense sums of money invested in American business, this showing seems meagre enough; but when one remembers the poverty and training of the Freedmen, the saving and investment of six or eight millions in enterprises managed by themselves is a most creditable accomplishment." This, of course does not include the very much greater amount invested in land and agricultural occupations.

The same study showed that at that time the race in the United States had three magazines, three daily papers, eleven school papers, and one hundred and thirty-six weekly papers.

From out this large number it would be impossible to designate even a very small proportion of the eminently successful men, and in the space of an article like this one would not attempt to mention individuals at all, were it not that specific cases serve to add emphasis. Among other Negro men of America who have been closely identified with the Business League, and who are conspicuously successful in business, may be named Mr. J. H. Lewis, of Boston, who is the owner and proprietor of one of the best tailoring establishments in Boston, occupying a large store in the business part of Washington Street; J. W. Adams, of Montgomery, Alabama, who does an annual business of \$40,000 in dry goods, millinery and furnishings; W. R. Pettiford, founder and president of a successful Negro bank in Birmingham; W. L. Taylor and D. B. McCary, the president and cashier respectively of Negro banks in Washington and Richmond; C. H. Smiley, of Chicago, and John S. Trower, of Philadelphia, caterers; Theodore W. Jones, of Chicago, furniture, storage and moving; Charles Banks, of Clarksdale, Mississippi, general merchandise, \$20,000 a year; Isaiah T. Montgomery, mayor of the Negro town of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, and S. L. Davis, mayor of Hobson City, Alabama, another purely Negro community. There are several publishing houses doing an excellent business, one in Nashville having a plant valued at \$75,000 and employing one hundred persons. The number of drug stores and undertaking establishments which are notably successful is large.

The Order of True Reformers, of Richmond, established years ago by a man who had been a slave in Georgia, now numbers 65,000 members, to whom it pays death benefits of from \$75 to \$1,000. The Order has a bank with a capital stock of \$100,000 and 10,000 depositors, which does an annual mercantile business of \$100,000. It prints a weekly paper with a circulation of 10,000 copies a week, and owns and operates a wholesale grocery store in Richmond, with branch stores in five other places in Virginia. This store employs thirty-five men and ten teams, and its cash sales for the twelve months preceding July 1, 1902, were \$98,000. The Order owns and occupies a good three-story brick building in Richmond. This building was erected with Negro money, paid to Negro laborers. The meetings of the League were held in the building, in a neat and commodious hall easily capable of seating twelve hundred persons, into which nearly twice that number were crowded for many of the meetings.

Mr. H. A. Tandy, of Lexington, Kentucky, is the senior member of the firm of Tandy & Bird, contractors and builders. Mr. Tandy began his affairs of life in Lexington as a hod carrier for the man whom he finally succeeded in business. His firm was awarded a \$250,000 contract for the Court House at Lexington, which they completed a few months ago; and from among forty-one bidders -and they not the lowest -were awarded a \$20,000 State contract for a building at the State College. W. F. Taylor, of Chicago, is the proprietor of the first colored drug store to be opened in that city. Lloyd G. Wheeler, of the same city, has for many years been the proprietor

of a well known tailoring business. J. C. Napier is a successful lawyer and real estate dealer of Nashville, who has practiced for twenty years in the courts of that city, and has recently built a good three-story brick office building there, occupied wholly by Negro business men.

Perhaps one sentence from an address which Mr. J. H. Lewis, of Boston, a tailor, made at the meeting in Boston, voices the spirit of the League as well as anything else that has been said: Speaking of what hope the Negro has to succeed in business, Mr. Lewis said:

"If you can make a better article than anybody else, and sell it cheaper than anybody else, you can command the markets of the world. Produce something that somebody else wants, whether it be a shoestring or a savings bank, and the purchaser or patron will not trouble himself to ask who the seller is. This same great economic law runs through every line of industry, whether it be farming, manufacturing, mercantile or professional pursuits. Recognize this fundamental law of trade; and to it tact, good manners, a resolute will, a tireless capacity for hard work, and you will succeed in business. I have found in my own experience of thirty years in business that success and its conditions lie all around us, regardless of race or color. I believe that it is possible for any man with the proper stuff in him to make a success in business wherever he may be. The best and only capacity to begin with is simply honesty, industry, and common sense."

The National Negro Business League has set going an earnest and active inquiry among our people as to each other's success in business, and has brought to view from far and wide many business enterprises which were not known beyond the immediate town or vicinity in which they are located. This knowledge has given a feeling of fellowship among our people which serves to strengthen and encourage them. We are led to feel and know that we are playing an important part in a field which for many years has been almost wholly occupied and operated by other races. It has strengthened us in the eyes of the world in that it is being shown that we are beginning to get that in hand which makes us brave men and women, and that we are contributing materially to the financial, commercial and manufacturing interests of our great country.