

Why Should Negro Business Men Go South?

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In a recent address to the members of the National Negro Business League, at their sixth annual meeting in New York, I said: "In commending opportunities for progress in business and commerce we should not disregard the fact that of the ten million members of our race, the great masses are in the South, and there, in my opinion, they will remain. While there are evils of which no one should lose sight -in creating and securing labor, in conducting business enterprises, and in securing homes -there is no other part of the United States that begins to offer a field more inviting than the South. We should see to it that we do not lose in the South that which we now possess. We should not grasp at a shadow, and lose the substance. If we neglect to occupy the field that is now before us in the South, it will become there as it is in the North -we will be excluded by those who are strangers to our tongue and customs."

In seeking to answer briefly the question that has been proposed to me, "Why should the Negro business man go South?" I believe I cannot do better than enlarge somewhat and make more specific the statement I have just quoted.

Emphasis should be put on the fact that the masses of the Negro people are now, and are likely to be for all time, in the South, for the most part on the farms and in the small towns, rather than the large cities.

They were born there, bred there, and even were it possible to remove them in any great numbers, I believe they are better fitted to live there than elsewhere, either on this continent or in Africa.

I saw the statement recently that until the beginning of the nineteenth century, no city has ever increased in size by the natural growth of its native population. Where great cities sprang up, they grew and maintained their population by constant accessions from the country districts. In other words, the population produced in the country went to the city only to die. It was not bad sanitary conditions alone that brought this about. The same causes which operated to destroy the population of the cities a hundred years ago, are still operating to-day, though to a less degree, no doubt, in the crowded city districts which most of the colored people usually live in, in the North.

I do not believe the masses of colored people are yet fitted to survive and prosper in the great northern cities to which so many of them are crowding. The temptations are too great, and the competition with the foreign population, with which they there come in contact, is too fierce.

I am convinced that for a long time to come the great mass of the prosperous, successful colored people will be found on the farms and in the small towns of the South.

But where the great masses of the Negro population are, there are the best opportunities for Negro business men. Experience has shown, I believe, even in the North, that the largest opportunities for the Negro in business are in providing for those needs of other members of his race, which the white business man, either through neglect, or lack of knowledge, has failed, or been unable to provide. The Negro knows the members of his own race. He knows the Negro people of his neighborhood, in their church, and in their family life, and is able to

discriminate in his dealings with them. This superiority in the matter of credits is in itself a business advantage, of which competition cannot easily deprive the Negro, and one which, with the extension of the modern methods of business, is likely to become of increasing importance.

Every condition which favors the Negro in the South, the cheapness of land, of the cost of living, opportunities for work, and his natural adaptation to the soil, favor also the Negro in business in the South. Indeed the great need of the masses of the Negro people for direction in the matter of buying and selling, saving and investing, makes opportunities for the Negro who possesses training in business affairs.

But there are other reasons which must appeal more and more to one who considers the matter thoughtfully. Money earned by the Negro in the way of business in the South is ordinarily worth more than money earned in the same way in the North. It is worth more, not merely because it goes further, but because the business man, in earning it, can be of more service to his race. The Negro banker who, in the course of his business, finds it necessary to encourage thrift and industry among his people, the Negro tradesman, who, for his own protection, must constantly discriminate between the honest and industrious members of his race, is at the same time performing a service to his people and the community as a whole, which should and does give a dignity to his work and a significance to his whole life.

The Negro who, in the course of his own business, is doing something which at the same time makes the world better, will in the long run stand higher in the community among his neighbors of both races, than he who, making more, and spending more, spends it, as he is tempted to do, for the superficial things which make life in the great northern cities so attractive to large numbers of the people of my race.