

## **THE NEGRO IN BUSINESS**

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The conference of the National Negro Business League, which assembled in Boston in August of 1900, was unique. For the first time since the negroes were freed an attempt was made to bring together, from all over the United States, a company of representative business men and women of the race. Over three hundred delegates were present. They came from thirty states, and from an area which extended from Nebraska to Florida and from Texas to Maine.

Many of these men once were slaves. Others were younger men, born since the civil war and educated in the industrial schools and colleges; but they were almost all alike in one respect, that they had come up from the bottom and had gained whatever of property and position which they possessed by their own efforts. The business enterprises which they represented were manifold; their range and the success which these men have attained in them were object-lessons to the country. Another lesson, no less striking, was the conduct of the conference itself.

The New Orleans riots occurred while the preparations for the conference were being made. The streets of New York resounded to the cries of a negro-hunting mob just at the time when many of the dele-

gates were leaving their homes to come to Boston. When the conference assembled, on the morning of August twenty-third, the newspapers were filled with accounts of the disturbances at Akron. And yet, throughout sessions which occupied two days and two evenings, in which at least two hundred persons spoke, there was not one single reference to the riots or to the conditions which gave rise to them. These were business men, come to Boston for a definite purpose with which politics had no connection, and they attended strictly to business. Nor was this the result of fear or intimidation. The position of the promoters of the league had been plainly stated beforehand and the policy of the gathering outlined.

I quote from one of the most widely published announcements of the meetings: "Those who are interested in the success of the league do not underestimate the importance of seeing to it that the negro does not give up any part of the struggle for retaining his citizenship. They are against the repeal of the fifteenth amendment, and they believe that election laws throughout the country should be made to apply with equal justice to black and white alike. They believe that if the franchise is restricted in any state it should not be done in such a way that an ignorant white man can vote while an ignorant black man cannot. At the same time they recognize the fact that to retain citizenship and the respect of the nation there must go with the negro's demands for justice, tangible, indisputable proofs of the progress of the race, or, briefly, that deeds and words must go together. They believe that helping the negro along commercial lines will help his political status. This is not a political meeting. It is a business gathering. Politics and other general matters pertaining to the race are dealt with at the sessions of the national Afro-American Council."

I think that a paragraph in an editorial in one of the Boston papers, printed just after the conference adjourned, described the tone of the gathering admirably. It said: "There was no politics in this gathering. There was no clamoring for rights. There was as little sentimentality as in a meeting of stock jobbers or railroad directors. . . . Wanton, insane cruelty of white men was something which colored men, minding their own business, could not reasonably cause, nor effectually rebuke. With a perfect dignity they left the matter to those whom it concerned. . . . Their conduct was a sign of power, equal to any other that the conference gave witness of, the supreme power of manliness that is recognized in self-restraint."

It had seemed to me for some time that an organization was needed which would bring together the colored business men and women of the country for consultation and to obtain information and inspiration from each other. As I had traveled through the country, especially in the South, I had often been impressed and repeatedly surprised to see how many colored men were succeeding in business enterprises, often in small, out-of-the-way places where they are never heard of, but where they are doing good work not only for themselves but for the race. I do not mean that the men and women who are in business in the cities are not doing equally well, but their work is better known because it is more obvious. How much I wish that our race might be judged by these people and by its students and teachers instead of, as is too often the case, by those who are in the penitentiaries and idle on the street corners. Other races are judged by their best. Why not the negro?

Unless one has given some consideration to the subject he will be surprised to learn how widely the

colored people have gone into business. There were present at the meeting in Boston the representative of a colored cotton factory, a bank president, the president of a negro coal mine, grocers, real-estate dealers, the owner of a four-story brick storage warehouse and the proprietor of a trucking business operating forty teams, dry-goods dealers, druggists, tailors, butchers, barbers, undertakers, the owner of a steam carpet-cleaning business, manufacturers of brooms, tinware and metal goods, hair goods, etc., a florist, printers and publishers, insurance agents, caterers, restaurant keepers, general merchants, contractors and builders, the owner and proprietor of a brick yard (in North Carolina) which turns out several million bricks a year, and in fact representatives of almost every industry which can be suggested.

Two men who were present at the conference were the mayors of negro towns which they have built up in the South. One of these men, Mr. Isaiah T. Montgomery, was once a slave of Jefferson Davis. Fifteen years ago he began to colonize a tract of land in the valley of the Yazoo River, in Mississippi. Colored people now own 12,000 acres there. In the town of Mound Bayou, which is the nucleus of the settlement, Mr. Montgomery said there are ten stores and shops owned by colored people, doing a business of at least \$30,000 a year. Mr. J. C. Leftwich, of Alabama, owns over a thousand acres of land not far from Montgomery, where he is building up a town which he has named "Klondike." All the business is in the hands of colored people, even the postmaster being a colored man.

Three of the best addresses were made by women, one of them, Mrs. A. M. Smith, the president of a colored business woman's club and employment agency in Chicago; one by Mrs. A. Thornton, a dermatologist, of

Cincinnati, and one by Mrs. A. A. Casneau, a dress-maker, of Boston. The last named woman is the author of a book upon dressmaking which has been quite widely used. She told of an interesting experience with a white woman who came to Boston to take some additional lessons from her, suggested from the book, and who did not know that the woman she was coming to see was a colored woman. For this to be understood I must first relate an incident which occurred to one of our Tuskegee Institute students, because it was to this incident that Mrs. Casneau referred.

Among the other industries taught at Tuskegee Institute is that of dairying. We have a herd of over one hundred good dairy cows, and classes of young men and women are constantly receiving practical instruction in this industry, doing all of the work of the dairy at the same time. There came to our knowledge the fact that the owners of a certain creamery were looking for a competent superintendent. We had just graduated a man whom we knew to be thoroughly competent in every way, but he was just about as black as any one could possibly be. Nevertheless we sent him on to apply for the position. When the owners of the creamery saw him they said: "But you are a colored man. That would never do. We cannot hire a colored man."

Our candidate politely intimated that he had not come there to talk about any color except butter color, and kept on talking about that, while the owners kept talking about his color. Finally something which he said so caught their attention that they told him he might stay and run the creamery for a fortnight, although they still insisted that it was out of the question for them to hire a colored man as superintendent.

When the returns for the first week's shipment of butter made by our man came back, it was found that the butter had sold for two cents a pound more than

any product of the creamery had ever before sold for. The owners of the establishment said: "Why, now, this is very singular;" and waited for the next week's report.

The second week's returns showed that the butter had sold for a cent a pound more than that of the week before, three cents more than before the colored man had taken charge of the work. That time the owners did not stop to say anything. They simply hired the man as quickly as they could. The extra three cents on a pound which he could get for his butter had knocked every particle of color out of his skin so far as they were concerned.

Mrs. Casneau, in her address before the league, said that when she received a letter from her customer saying that the woman was coming to Boston to call upon her at a certain time, her courage failed her because she knew that this customer had no idea that she was to meet a colored woman as the author of the book which she had been studying. When the day came, and the bell rang, and she was told that this woman had arrived, she was at first almost tempted to send in word that she was ill and could not see her, when suddenly there came into her mind the story of the Tuskegee graduate who had declined to discuss any question of color except the butter color which pertained to his business. "I went into the room as bravely as I could," she said, "and, although the woman looked and acted just as I felt sure she would, I would not let myself take any notice of it, but went on talking business as fast as I could. The result was that we made a business engagement, through which, afterwards, other work came to me."

This meeting not only showed to the country what the colored people are doing, but it gave the delegates, especially those who came from the South, an oppor-

tunity to see something of the business methods employed by northern people. I think it will have something of the same good effect on them that the bringing of the Cuban teachers to the United States may be expected to have on the Cubans.

If a record of the business enterprises operated by colored men and women in the United States were available it would be interesting and instructive, but such information has not yet been very generally reported.

From the published reports of the valuable studies of Professor W. E. B. Du Bois I make a few extracts bearing on the subject. In his book, "The Philadelphia Negro," Dr. Du Bois deals chiefly with the colored people of the seventh ward of that city. The author says that this particular ward is selected because it "is an historic center of negro population and contains one-fifth of all the negroes in the city." The negro population of Philadelphia in 1890 was 40,000, and over 8,000 lived in this ward. Both these numbers will undoubtedly show an increase when the figures of the census recently taken are available. In this ward Dr. Du Bois found the following-named business establishments operated by negroes: 39 restaurants, 24 barber shops, 11 groceries, 11 cigar stores, 2 candy and notion stores, 4 upholsterers, 2 liquor saloons, 4 undertakers (two of these were women), 1 newspaper, 1 drug store, 2 patent-medicine stores, 4 printing offices.

There were 83 caterers in the ward, but some of these Dr. Du Bois reports as doing a small business, and others as engaged in the business only a part of the year, being otherwise employed the rest of the time. The business of catering by negroes in Philadelphia has always been remarkable for the ability and success with which it has been conducted. Several men of the race in that city have been famous for their

work in this line. Dr. Du Bois, in writing of the caterer, reports "about ten who do a business of from \$3,000 to \$5,000 a year."

In addition to these there were at the same time in other parts of the city, among the negro business establishments, 49 barber shops, 8 grocery stores, 27 restaurants, 8 coal and wood dealers. There was a successful florist, a large crockery store, and successful real-estate dealers.

From the reports of other studies of Dr. Du Bois, in the South, I make some extracts. I do not quote his lists in full, but give only a few of the leading enterprises reported:

Birmingham, Ala.—8 grocers, 6 barbers, 4 druggists, 4 tailors. Montgomery, Ala.—6 grocers, 2 undertakers, 2 drug-store keepers, 1 butcher. Vicksburg, Miss.—2 jewelers, 2 tailors, 2 drug-store keepers, 2 newspapers, 2 dry-goods dealers, 1 undertaker. Nashville, Tenn.—9 contractors, 6 grocers, 2 undertakers, 2 saloon keepers, 2 drug stores. Houston, Tex.—11 grocers, 10 real-estate dealers, 5 contractors, 6 barbers. Richmond, Va.—2 banking and insurance men, 2 undertakers, 2 fish dealers. Tallahassie, Fla.—3 groceries, 2 meat markets. Americus, Ga.—12 groceries, 1 drug store, 1 wood yard. Seattle, Wash.—1 real-estate dealer, 2 barbers, 3 restaurants. I do not have available a list of enterprises in the city of Pensacola, Fla., but there are at least two groceries there, conducted by colored men, doing a business of \$10,000 a year each, and successful restaurants, contractors, drug-store keepers, shoe-makers and tailors.

Much has been said and written about the fitness of the negro for work in cotton factories. Until the negro is given a fair trial under encouraging conditions I shall be slow to believe that he is not fitted for profitable work in factories. For years the colored

man has been the main operative in the tobacco factories of the South, and, aside from this, he operates in very large measure all of the cotton-seed oil mills in the South and is engaged in every avenue of mechanical work. I think those who hold to the theory that the negro cannot be depended upon as a laborer in factories will find their theory exploded in a few years very much in the same way that dozens of other theories regarding him have been exploded.

The failure of the Vesta Cotton Mills, in Charleston, S. C., has been laid to the door of the negro. Those who have written on this subject seemingly forget, however, to state that these same mills failed once, and I think twice, under white labor and that these mills have never had colored labor exclusively in them. When I visited Charleston a few months ago and made a careful inspection of these mills, I found at least one-third of the operatives were white people, the remaining two-thirds being colored. The colored people, as I remember it, occupied two floors and the whites the other floor, so that the failure cannot be wholly ascribed to colored labor.

Few cotton mills North or South have succeeded in large cities where there is no opportunity to segregate and control the labor. If the negro is given a fair trial in a small village, or in a country district where he is so situated in his home life that the operators can control, as they do in the case of the white laborer, the life of the families, I believe that the negro will succeed in the cotton factory equally as well as the white man. Until such fair trial is given him it is unfair and misleading to make sweeping statements regarding his reliability in this respect.

In further proof of my statement that the negro can succeed in factory work if given a fair opportunity, I refer to the employment of colored persons in the

silk factory at Fayetteville, N. C., a small town where conditions are much more conducive to factory life than in Charleston. Mr. H. E. C. Bryant, a white man and one of the editors of the *Charlotte Daily Observer*, published at Charlotte, N. C., recently visited this silk factory in Fayetteville and after his visit said in his paper:

"It is the most unique and interesting manufacturing plant in the state, if not in the entire South. It is managed by Rev. T. W. Thurston, a mulatto, born in Pennsylvania and educated in Philadelphia, and who is highly respected by the white and colored citizens of Fayetteville."

Mr. Bryant further remarks:

"It has proved a signal success. Its continued success will mean much to the negro of the South. The building is of brick, three stories high, and the mill has 10,000 spindles and employs 400 operatives, mainly boys and girls between 10 and 18 years old. The first floor contains the reeling department over which Mr. J. H. Scarborough, a young German, is foreman; the second is devoted to winding and doubling, and Gertrude Hood (colored), daughter of Bishop Hood, is in charge; and the third, weaving, with Mr. Harry Fieldhouse, an Englishman, as foreman. The mill has the appearance of a well-regulated school. The operatives are thoroughly organized and work with perfect system. I found order and neatness on every hand. The children did not seem frightened but satisfied and ambitious. None but the best class of boys and girls are employed at the silk mills. The employment of colored labor has not caused racial trouble. It takes the young negro from the streets and makes a good citizen of him and turns loose about \$4,000 a month to spend for food and clothing."

Despite these evidences of progress, it has been said, sometimes, that negroes cannot come together and successfully unite in holding such meetings as that of the National Negro Business League, and that this is a proof of their business incapacity. I think such a meeting as that of last August disproves that theory. What gave me the most encouragement was the manly and straightforward tone used in all the papers and discussions. There were no complaints. At the next session I believe that there will be still larger numbers and stronger support. I believe that as a race we shall

succeed and grow, and be a people, with our due representation in business life, right here in America. We must not be discouraged, and we must watch our opportunities and take advantage of them. There is no force on earth that can keep back a brave people that is determined to get education and property and Christian character. They never can be defeated in their progress.

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