

THE EVOLUTION OF NEGRO LABOR.

BY CARL KELSEY.

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Few questions now before the American people are of more general interest than that which relates to the rôle the negro is to play in the great industrial advance of the southern states. That there is much in existing conditions both of encouragement and discouragement is patent to every careful observer. Unfortunately most of those discussing the questions close their eyes to one or the other set of facts and are wildly optimistic or pessimistic accordingly. As everyone has his standpoint, let me say that I agree with Dr. J. L. M. Curry, who states: "I have very little respect for the intelligence or the patriotism of the man who doubts the capacity of the negro for improvement or usefulness." The civilization of a race has taken place many times in the history of the world. How long it may take for any given people, or whether the development may be stopped by unpropitious conditions, no one can tell. It took the Germans hundreds of years to absorb the Roman culture, and the immoralities of the May days were the despair of the Puritans almost a thousand years later. One trouble regarding the negro is that we have no standard for comparison. It may be that if we knew the rate of progress of other primitive peoples we should find his progress remarkable.

We know comparatively little about the ancestry of the American negroes. They came, originally, from the west coast of Africa, but it is not known how far into the interior the slave trade had extended. Western Africa was inhabited by many tribes, some of which were much superior to others. It is certain that Semitic blood had been infused into the more

northern tribes. All these tribal distinctions, however, have been hopelessly lost in America and to increase the confusion no small amount of white blood has been added. The number and relative position of negroes as contrasted with mulattoes, etc., no one knows, and the census does not attempt to ascertain. The traveler through the south is impressed by the fact that the leaders in industry and education are not pure negroes. It should be remembered that a black skin is no guarantee of the pure negro. Crossing with the whites may show itself in shape of skull and features as well as in color. While ethnologists may not yet predict the results of race mixture, it is safe to say that it is unscientific to use the achievements of a score of half breeds as an index of what may be immediately expected of the original stock.

In Africa the negroes had established no enduring state. At the time when the slave trade was at its height the strong hill tribes of the east had been crowding the weaker tribes to the low west coast; slavery in its worst forms was universal and slave raids were known long before the advent of Europeans. Cannibalism was prevalent; religion a mass of grossest superstition, with power of life and death in the hands of the priests of the mystic rites of the Voodoo and Obea. The sexual passions were strongly developed. Marriage was a living together for a longer or shorter time. Life and property were in subjection to the chiefs, consequently very insecure. Wild animals were dangerous. The damp tropical climate made great provisions for the future unnecessary, not to say impossible, while social conditions did not favor the accumulation of property.

The transfer to America made a sharp break with the past. Simple dialects were exchanged for a complex language. Physical health was carefully safeguarded; life became more secure. An emphasis previously unknown was placed upon the permanence of marital relations. In return the negro, for the first time, was made to work. Admitting, as all do, that slavery was an economic mistake, from the negro's standpoint it conferred a great benefit by teaching him to work. Booker T. Washington has said: "American slavery was a great curse to both races and I would be the last

to apologize for it; but, in the presence of God, I believe that slavery laid the foundation for the solution of the problem that is now before us in the south. During slavery, the negro was taught every trade, every industry, that constitutes the foundation for making a living." Dr. H. B. Frissell of Hampton has borne the same testimony. "The southern plantation was really a great trade school, where thousands received instruction in mechanic arts, in agriculture, in cooking, sewing and other domestic occupations. Although it may be said that all this instruction was given from selfish motives, yet the fact remains that the slaves on many plantations had good industrial training, and all honor is due to the conscientious men and still more to the noble women of the south, who in slavery times helped to prepare the way for the better days that were to come." Work is the foundation of human progress. The people which has learned to work and which lives where work brings proportionate results has made a great start toward civilization. The advantages of the discipline of slavery are seen when the negro and the Indian are contrasted. Dr. Frissell says of this comparison: "When the children of these two races are placed side by side as they are in the schoolrooms and workshops, and on the farms, at Hampton, it is not difficult to perceive that the training which the black had under slavery was far more valuable as a preparation for civilized life than the freedom from training and service enjoyed by the Indian on the western reservations. For while slavery taught the colored man to work, the reservation pauperized the Indian with free rations; while slavery brought the black into the closest relations with the white race and its ways of life, the reservation shut the Indian away from his white brothers and gave him little knowledge of their civilization, language or religion."

Under slavery three general fields of service opened to the blacks. The first, of the quickest and brightest, was that of the house and body servants. These were constantly in the houses and with their masters and absorbed, as did the next class, no small amount of learning. The second class, consisting of men alone, comprised the artisans, carpenters, masons, blacksmiths and the like. In large parts of the south

these had practical monopoly of the trades. In technical knowledge, they, of course, soon outstripped their masters and became, as compared with other slaves, independent and self reliant. The significance of this training appeared in the generation after freedom was declared. The third and largest class embraced the field hands. To this class were naturally consigned the dullest as well as those whose services were not elsewhere needed. Some of these became foremen, but the vast majority worked on tasks directly under the eye of overseers. As a rule, the methods of agriculture were crude; tools, usually heavy clumsy hoes, were of the simplest; even plows were unknown in some districts until long after the war.

I recently have seen grass being cut with hoes. The soil was cultivated for a time then abandoned for new land. Corn, cotton and in a few districts rice, were the chief crops, although each plantation raised its own fruit and vegetables and about the cabins in the quarters were often little garden patches. Slavery, however, like Africa, gave the negro little training in independence, in responsibility for propriety, in thrift and foresight for the morrow. All things were the master's and he had to replace old tools, furnish a sufficiency of food and clothes, and be responsible for the whole. Thus, neither Africa nor America had trained the bulk of the negroes to any sense of personal responsibility away from the eye of the manager. Moreover, there had been nothing of home life with all that this means in the development of a race.

Freedom came, a second sharp break with old economic conditions. There was now no one to provide the necessities of life. But the negro can labor and the white must employ his labor. Gradually new relationships are worked out.

It is often assumed that slavery laid a black deposit of equal depth over the south. This assumption is incorrect. There are sections of the south where the whites knew and know as little about the blacks as do the average northerners. The economic causes which made slavery unprofitable at the north fixed its location in the south. The center of slavery moved, therefore, south and west. Even before the war, Kentucky and Virginia had become largely breeding states and slave labor less and less profitable. The least desirable

slaves were sold south, the best retained even when economically unprofitable, because of family pride. For this reason, perhaps, the Virginia negroes have often been considered the best of the race. At the outbreak of the war the alluvial districts of the lower Mississippi were probably the most prosperous of the slave regions. Since the war other causes, such as the attraction of northern cities, have conspired to make the rate of increase among negroes in the northern slave states lower than that of the whites. What this means to the economic life of a state is seen when we learn that in 1860 negroes were in a majority in five counties of Maryland, in but two in 1900; in forty three counties of Virginia in 1860, and thirty five in 1900, while sixty counties out of the one hundred showed an actual decrease of negro population between 1890-1900. In North Carolina in 1860 nineteen counties were black, fifteen in 1900.

Along the Tennessee there are many negro farmers. In two counties, Winston and Collman, the census records only twenty eight negroes. The explanation is that negroes are not allowed there and it is interesting to note that in this district the dominant element is that of Germans, who emigrated from Ohio since the war. The records show that six counties in north Alabama lost in negro population and two others were stationary during the last decade, while in the black belt the whites have decreased in four counties and are stationary in two others. The negroes are in a minority in the pine flats district. This is true in other states. From 1890-1900 the negroes lost relatively in the metamorphic and sand hills districts, were stationary in the prairie and gained slightly in the oak hills, and more heavily in the pine woods. This statement is based on an examination of five or six typical counties lying almost wholly within each of the regions named.

This segregation of the negroes is found in all the states in a more or less marked degree. With a fairly dense population on the immediate seacoast of the Atlantic, the bulk is found from southeastern Virginia through eastern Mississippi, along the line of the pine hills and black prairie of Alabama, swinging north with this prairie as it enters Mississippi. Only the border of the metaphoric region is encroached upon. The

negroes are again in the majority in the alluvial districts of the Mississippi and Red rivers. In Texas, though seldom preponderating, they are located chiefly in the oak and hickory lands, which run from the northeast corner, southwest through the center of the state.

Wherever in the south a heavy negro population is found outside of what we may call the black belt, it may be accounted for by the presence of some city or by the development of some local industry giving employment to numbers of unskilled laborers. Thus, the counties in Virginia which are gaining heavily in negro population are those about Norfolk, Newport News and Richmond. In Mississippi the delta is the seat of an increasing black population. In many sections the negroes are leaving the hills for the more fertile bottom lands. Previous to 1884, only the lands immediately adjacent to the rivers in this district could be cultivated, now the railroads are penetrating every part of it. Meantime the levee system is lessening the danger of floods. Arkansas shows a similar, but slower development. Oklahoma and the Indian Territory in the west and Florida in the east have attracted many negroes. Numbers have also gone to the coal field of West Virginia. The trend to northern cities has been mentioned.

The significance of this geographical segregation and the movement of the negro population is often overlooked, and this may lead to very great misconceptions regarding actual conditions. On page 419 of volume VI., Census 1900, we learn that the negro landowner and cash tenant produced almost as much cotton per acre as did white owners and tenants and that in Mississippi the negro tenants actually produced more per acre than white tenants. Are we to infer that they are better farmers than the whites, or do these facts denote remarkable progress, as the census informs us? By no means. In Mississippi the whites farm the hill country, the delta is cultivated only by negroes and the delta land will raise twice as much cotton per acre as the hills. No wonder the negroes' crops are larger. Moreover, the negro owner and cash tenant are not independent of the white man. Nearly all of them receive advances from white factors, who personally or through their riders visit their debtors and give

instructions as to the cultivation of the crops. If these instructions are not followed the advances stop. If we are to base our estimates of the negro upon such facts we may as well argue that the negro owners are poorer farmers than negro tenants, for the same table shows that in nearly every state the tenants raise more per acre than do the owners. The explanation, in part at least, is that the tenants are probably under closer supervision of the white planter.

This segregation brings up other questions. Why does Dr. Paul Barringer, of Virginia, find that race hostility is increasing, while Mr. A. H. Stone, of Greenville, Mississippi, says that their problem is how to get more negroes? What is the significance of the fact that there is least race friction in districts in which the negro is relatively most numerous? Why do lynchings and assaults upon white women seem largely confined to regions in which the negro is least numerous? What does this segregation mean for the future of the negro? Professor DuBois has noted a difference in cities. Savannah is an old city, where the class of masters among the whites and of trained and confidential slaves among the negroes formed an exceptionally large part of the population. The result has been unusual good feeling between the races and the entrance of negroes into all walks of industrial life with little or no opposition. Atlanta, on the other hand, is quite opposite in character. Here the poor whites from north Georgia, who neither owned slaves nor had any acquaintance with negro character, have come into contact and severe competition with the blacks. The result has been intense race feeling. What does it signify that the prosperous section of Alabama is the north, in which whites predominate, while in Mississippi power seems to be concentrating in the alluvial regions in which the negroes are in the majority? Yet again, the manufactories which are springing up in the south are moving westward along the hills of the Piedmont and have scarcely affected the life of the negro. Is he to have no part in this save as an unskilled laborer? Certainly here is a field for study which has as yet been little worked. The influence which this segregation has upon the school opportunities of the negro should not be overlooked.

This geographical segregation naturally has greatest significance for the farmers, who comprise some 85 per cent of the negro men in productive pursuits and 44 per cent of the women, for city conditions are everywhere more or less similar. The land occupied by negro farmers may be divided into several districts: (1) Virginia and Kentucky north of the line of profitable cotton culture; (2) the Atlantic coast; (3) the pine flats and hills which sweep westward around the Piedmont to central Mississippi; the black prairie of Alabama and eastern Mississippi and the oak woods of Alabama and Mississippi; (4) the alluvial regions of the Mississippi and Red rivers; (5) prairies of Texas.

1. In Kentucky, negroes cultivate only about 4.8 per cent of the farms and in Virginia only 26.7. As has been noted, there seems to be an exodus from these farming sections. Cotton is no longer profitable and the tobacco industry seems to be concentrating in the hands of the whites. These Virginia lands have been greatly reduced in value in recent years and many have passed into the hands of negroes, perhaps because no one else wanted them. Farm hands get from six to ten dollars per month.

2. The seacoast region offers peculiar facilities for gaining an easy livelihood. In the northern section (Virginia) there has been a great development of the oyster industry, the negro oystermen making about \$8 a month and families occupied in shucking oysters earning up to \$400 a year, three fourths gaining less than \$250. Berry picking occupies much time in the early summer. The work is not continuous as on the farm and is accordingly preferred. In the southern portion along the islands of Carolina and Georgia the streams abound in fish and crabs. The climate is warm. There are some rice plantations and cotton is of the Sea Island variety. The day laborer gets from \$0.35 to \$0.50 on the farm; \$0.75 or so in the phosphate industry. This latter is declining and the negroes who left the farms to go into it are drifting to the cities. Land is abundant and cheap. In some places a negro can rent all he wants for \$10 a year, it being taken for granted that he will not use more than ten acres and \$1 being a general rent. The farmer gets advances of from \$35 to \$50 a

year. The rice planters say it is harder and harder to get laborers.

3. In this section are grouped several different soils, but they are about equally adapted to cotton, the prairie soil being the best, probably, and are under similar conditions of rainfall. The soils are light and easily tilled. They wash badly and have suffered greatly from improper tillage. The introduction of artificial fertilizers has enabled them to keep up a competition with the newer and better soils of the west. On the whole, however, it seems to be a losing game for the negro. To produce cotton successfully requires an expenditure of \$1.75 to \$2 an acre for fertilizer and this the negro often fails to appreciate. The result is that in most of this district the negroes are not progressing as they might. Professor DuBois says: "A good season with good prices regularly sent a number out of debt and made them peasant proprietors; a bad season either in weather or prices still means the ruin of a thousand black homes. The industrial awakening of Georgia has tended to send up the rent of the farming lands, while at the same time the crop lien system, being especially suited to a non perishable crop like cotton, checks and often absolutely forbids diversity in agriculture, and thus gives the unearned increment almost entirely to the whites." Professor DuBois gives the record of a year for 271 families as follows:

Bankrupt and sold out.....	8
\$100 or more in debt.....	61
\$25 to \$100 in debt.....	54
\$1 to \$25 in debt.....	47
Cleared nothing.....	53
Cleared \$1 to \$25.....	27
Cleared \$25 to \$100.....	21
Cleared \$100.....	5
	<hr/>
	271

In this district one-mule farms, i.e., thirty to forty acres, prevail, the rent ranging from \$2 to \$4 an acre. The average amount of advances secured is from \$50 to \$75, a good profit being paid on all goods and high interest on the total advanced. In 1900 a typical family of three adults and three children, owning a mule and two cows, leasing fifty acres

of land, not all in cultivation, secured the following advances:

Balance, January 1, 1900.....	\$0 50
Cash.....	9 00
Clothing.....	9 79
Feed for stock.....	11 50
Provisions.....	13 48
Tobacco.....	80
Tools.....	40
Interest and recording fee (\$1 00).....	5 77
	<hr/>
	\$51 24

Advances are based on number of working hands. They begin about February and stop in August. The family must get along as best it can in the interim.

The remainder of his money was spent elsewhere and he must have come out about even, as on January 1, 1901, he owed the planter about \$4. The plow and hoes, etc., needed by the farmer cost not to exceed \$3. Really a large part of the interest should be charged to wages of superintendence, as the merchant has learned that if he wants his money he must himself, or by men called riders, keep in constant touch with his debtors to see that the crops are cultivated. The negro knows how to raise cotton, but he may neglect to plow his field unless reminded. As is well known, the crop is mortgaged in advance, for few negroes are able to advance themselves. A dishonest creditor will manage to get about all the crop. This fact, combined with the necessity for raising cotton to meet the mortgage requirements and the lower price of cotton, has done much to discourage the farmer in this district and to drive the young people away from the farm. To these causes should be added the fact that few negroes raise their own supply of vegetables, and are, therefore, compelled to buy. All plant gardens but few take care of them. The last catalogue of Tuskegee states: "If they have any garden at all it is apt to be choked with weeds and other noxious growths. With every advantage of soil and climate, and with a steady market, if they live near any city or large town, few of the colored farmers get any benefit from this, one of the most profitable of all industries." In a word, in the great trucking industry, the negroes bear little part. Field hands get about \$0.50 per day and find themselves. A diversified agriculture

would greatly improve the situation, but for this he is not prepared. In poor years large numbers seek temporary work on the railroads or in the cities. The planters say the old men, women, and girls are their most steady workers.

4. The alluvial lands. These may be subdivided into the cotton in the north and the cane districts in the south. In the cotton district we come upon a very different condition of affairs. The cabins are better. Land rents from \$5 to \$8 per acre, and the average amount tilled by a family does not exceed twenty acres. The average advances range from \$100 to \$150 a year. They are continued as long as is necessary. Wages range from \$0.60 to \$0.75 a day, and during cotton picking time \$1.50 upward is often made. In 1900 a family of five adults and two children (under fourteen) came into the delta of Mississippi. They had nothing, not even decent clothing. In 1901 they cultivated thirty acres of land on which they raised twenty seven bales of cotton. They now own a wagon and farm implements, two mules, pigs, and chickens. Their plantation account in 1901 was as follows:

DEBIT.		CREDIT.	
Doctor.....	\$35 35	Cotton.....	\$1,091 28
Clothes and rations.....	284 10	Cotton seed.....	196 00
Mule.....	77 00		
Feed.....	5 00		
Extra labor (on their place)..	67 60		
Ginning.....	101 25		
Rent.....	175 50		
Cash.....	290 00		
	\$1,085 80		\$1,287 28

This left them a balance of nearly \$250. This family is composed of good workers, but they are by no means exceptional. I wish I could add that the negroes in this district were saving their money, but I fear most of them waste their earnings. In fact they often squander as much as families in the eastern districts earn. Of course there are many exceptions. Yet in spite of the opportunities planters find it difficult to get all the cotton picked. The average family can pick all they raise, but they do not—hence a heavy charge for extra labor, and this labor is often hard to get. The work must be carefully watched if it is to be well done. If the

attempt is made to improve the cotton by taking special pains to secure certain seed, as like as not it will develop that some enterprising renter has mixed in a lot of poor stuff obtained elsewhere. In this region also wood is free and tenants often have free pasturage for stock.

The situation varies in the cane and rice country as here the planters pay cash wages for all labor. Houses with garden plots, firewood, etc., are furnished. The wages run from \$0.40 per day for women to \$0.70 for men, during cultivation, rising during the grinding season to \$0.75 for women and \$1 to \$1.25 for men, children, of course, receiving less. On cane plantations there is work the year round, but there is great difficulty in getting regular labor. All work is done under careful supervision of overseers. The average yearly returns seem to be less than in the cotton country. One family of which I have record, the working force consisting of father and son (with a little assistance from two small children) earned, in 1901, \$382.54. The man owns a horse and buggy, lives and dresses well and has money stored away. Wages are usually paid by an order on the store, which must be cashed if negro has no account. The men seldom work more than five and one half days per week, hence arose the custom of paying off every eleven days. The planter never knows how many laborers he will have on Monday, and it is said to be difficult to get extra work done even at higher wages. On one plantation, in 1901, an effort was made to get the cane cut at so much per ton. Higher wages were offered and the men could make \$1.15, women \$1 per day. After a week or so the hands asked to return to the gang at \$1 and \$0.75 per day, as they disliked the extra exertion. Negroes have had little to do with the development of the rice industry of southern Louisiana. Along the river some rice is raised, usually in connection with other crops. The rice season is short and other labor must be found if this is the sole crop.

The last district is found in the prairie regions of Texas. I have never visited this district and can get only hearsay evidence, which tends to show that the negroes are more prosperous than in most sections of the east. I make, therefore, no special mention of this state.