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THE NEGRO IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA DURING  
RECONSTRUCTION.<sup>1</sup>

WILLIAM HAZAIAH WILLIAMS,<sup>2</sup>

INTRODUCTION.

The question of abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia in 1682 was no new issue, for as early as 1805 the anti-slavery sentiment was manifested. This was seen in the Congressional debates over the importation of slaves and the petition from the citizens of the District asking that slavery and the slave trade be abolished therein. The petition suffered an overwhelming defeat in Congress but the spirit of freedom survived. About 1818 or 1819 this movement was rapidly gaining momentum for it attracted the attention of many persons who were abolitionists at heart and desired only a pretext to exert their influence. There were also many organizations which condemned every form of servitude be it mild or severe.<sup>3</sup>

In 1828 the first effort to secure a gradual abolition of slavery in the District was put forth by 1,000 citizens who signed a petition and presented the same to Congress, praying that body to abolish slavery within the confines of said Territory.<sup>4</sup>

The question of abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia soon became a political issue and was used in the platforms of high office seekers. In 1836 Martin Van Buren adopted a pro-slavery platform for the District, and in his inaugural address committed himself to a

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<sup>1</sup> Two general accounts have been written concerning the Negro in the District of Columbia. One by Mary Tremain and the other by Edward Ingle. Both of these failed to make use of many valuable sources of information. The former was based principally on Congressional sources while the latter, although a Johns Hopkins University study in History, was written without a critical and discriminating employment of the historical data that were available. The present study is an attempt to survey the Negro population in the District of Columbia during Reconstruction, which was one of the most critical periods in the history of the National Capital.

<sup>2</sup> This study was completed under the direction of Professor Charles H. Wesley of the Department of History. It was submitted as a partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Master of Arts degree, Howard University.

<sup>3</sup> Annals of Congress, pp. 995-998.

<sup>4</sup> The Daily Morning Chronicle, January 9, 1866.

policy of non-interference. This was a direct blow at those who opposed his views relative to the abolition movement. His address contains the following significant statement: "If the desire of those of my countrymen who were favorable to my election, was gratified, I must go into the Presidential chair the inflexible and uncompromising opponent of every attempt on the part of Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia against the wishes of the slave holding States."<sup>5</sup>

At this early stage of the abolition campaign the pro-slavery sentiment dominated and men had to sacrifice principle to office. This was not only true of Martin Van Buren but is also true of his opponent, Mr. White, who was running on a similar ticket and was defeated in the Presidential election. He enunciated his policy in the following language: "I do not believe that Congress has the power to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia and if that body did possess the power I think to exercise it would be the very worst policy. Holding these views, I would act on them in any situation in which I could be placed and for both reasons would, if called upon to act, withhold my assent to any bill having in view such an object."<sup>6</sup>

In 1840 the arguments for the abolition of slavery in the District were greatly accelerated by the pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions which were contending over an Act of Congress passed the previous year. This measure was an attempt to stem the tide of public opinion by denying any person or persons the right of petition or even to present memorials and requests to Congress advocating the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia.<sup>7</sup> This resolution was presented by Mr. Adams of Maryland and it provoked quite a discussion both in and out of Congress. Since Congress had been stormed with such memorials and petitions, public sentiment was rapidly crystallizing in favor of making the experiment first with the District of Columbia.

That the District was the vantage ground is evidenced in the steps taken by the various State Legislatures asking their Congressmen residing in Washington to use their influence to stamp out slavery in the District. The following account may be cited to verify this statement: "We ask Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, is the prayer presumptuous? If so, it becomes not the House of Representatives to rebuke us, for on the 9th of January this body resolved that the Committee on the District be instructed to inquire into the expediency of providing by law for a gradual abolition of slavery in the District in such a manner that the interest of no individual should be

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<sup>5</sup> A Compilation of Messages and Papers of Presidents, p. 318.

<sup>6</sup> Jay's Miscellaneous Writings, pp. 222-223.

<sup>7</sup> Congressional Globe, 26th Congress, 2nd Session. Vol. 8, p. 11.

injured thereby. In 1828 the Legislature of Pennsylvania instructed their members to procure if practicable the passage of a law to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. In 1829 the Assembly of New York voted to direct their Representatives to make every proper exertion to effect the passage of a law to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. In 1837 the Senate of Massachusetts resolved that Congress having the exclusive legislation within the District of Columbia possessed the right to abolish slavery and the slave trade in the District. In 1838 the House of Representatives of Maine resolved that the continuance of slavery within the sacred inclosure and chosen seat of the National Government was inconsistent with the due regard to the enlightened judgment of mankind. The same year the Legislature of Vermont instructed their Representatives in Congress to use their utmost effort to procure the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the District of Columbia.”<sup>8</sup>

The above statements are sufficient to prove that the abolition of slavery in the District was a question of grave importance and reached far beyond the confines of the Territory in question. In addition to the appeals of State Legislatures there were several organizations that petitioned Congress in behalf of the abolition movement. One Mr. Porter presented a petition from the Society of Friends in the State of Michigan praying Congress to change the status of Negroes in the District in reference to both slavery and the slave trade.<sup>9</sup>

Sustained by half a century of abolition sentiment, Senator Wilson introduced into the United States Senate on Dec. 4, 1861 a bill destined to lift the stigma of slavery from the fair name of the Nation's Capital. The pro-slavery element became quite alarmed over this measure, not so much because it sought to liberate the slaves in the District of Columbia but more because they feared the reaction it might have upon the slave holding States. They saw in the downfall of slavery in the District the inevitable passing of the whole system.<sup>10</sup> This was no new opinion growing out of the then existing conditions but rather the current opinion shared by many prior to this time. In 1836 Calhoun opposed a petition to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia on the following ground: “These abolitionists moved first upon the District of Columbia which was the weakest point in order to open afterwards on the States.”<sup>11</sup>

A petition was presented to Congress by Abraham Lincoln request-

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<sup>8</sup> Jay's Miscellaneous Writings, pp. 214-215.

<sup>9</sup> Congressional Globe, 26 Congress, 2 Session. Vol. 8, p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> The National Intelligencer, March 6, 1862.

<sup>11</sup> Congressional Globe, 24th Congress, 1st Session Vol., p. 77.

ing a "gradual emancipation" and the purchase of slaves through a treaty with all States assenting thereto. This petition greatly stimulated the anti-slavery movement and those who sponsored the cause were eager to make the District of Columbia the basis of operation. Following this petition was another article by Lincoln titled, "Compensation and Emancipation," which appeared in the *National Intelligencer*. These articles were national in their scope but offered fruitful suggestions to those who centered their attack upon the evil nearest their door which was the District of Columbia.<sup>12</sup>

Senator Davis of Kentucky offered an amendment to the bill to the effect that those persons liberated be colonized outside the limits of the United States, and that \$100,000 be appropriated by Congress for same. In support of his argument that slaves were property, he cited the instance of Congress passing the Fugitive Slave Law which provided for the return of runaway slaves to their owners thus recognizing the property rights. He also cited the case of the treaty with Ghent by which the English government was to pay for the slaves deported from the country during the War of 1812. This argument was directed against the idea of liberating Negroes with a view of becoming full fledged citizens in the District of Columbia.

Senator Sherman was one of the strong champions of the abolition movement and exerted a great influence over his colleagues. His logical arguments were not without convictions therefore his opponents quite frequently anticipated his discourse and sought to baffle them by interrogating him on the floor of the Senate. This method was resorted to by Senator Davis who asked questions that were not germane to the issue which was under discussion.<sup>13</sup> He, along with other advocates, held that the psychological moment for abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia had arrived. They based their claims on the following grounds: First, the small number of slaves upon whom the law would operate would make it convenient, there being about 3,185 in the District at that time.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, that many of the slave owners were disloyal and had gone South to join the Confederate forces which were seeking to destroy the Union; therefore their property should be confiscated and their slaves should be set free. In the third place, Washington had become the "Paradise for Negroes" and was the one center where social equality was more nearly obtained. These grounds could not be passed over

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<sup>12</sup> The *National Intelligencer*, March 10, 1862.

<sup>13</sup> The *National Intelligencer*, March 28, 1862.

<sup>14</sup> The Bureau of Census: *Negro Population of U. S., 1790-1915*, p. 57.

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lightly for many others besides the Congressional advocates held them to be valid.

Every official organ was pressed into service by the contending factions that their cause might triumph. The Washington Evening Star made the following comment upon an editorial that appeared in the National Intelligencer: "We recommend to the public the able criticism in the morning's Intelligencer upon the strange speech delivered Wednesday last by Senator Sherman. We will content ourselves with simply remarking that the effort in question was a lame apology on the author's part for doing what he evidently felt to be cruel and unstatesmanlike injustice to the citizens of the District, that of forcing Negro equality upon white men."<sup>15</sup>

The National Republican in tortuous style assailed the Intelligencer for its pro-slavery views expressed against the proposed measure for the District. The New York Tribune threw the weight of its influence into the balances in favor of the bill holding that the emancipated element would become a valuable asset rather than a liability to the District.<sup>16</sup>

The Daily Globe spoke in no uncertain tones against any measure that had for its object the promotion of the Negro. It held that by all means the abolition movement should be "gradual" as stated in the President's message to Congress. In the next place should the issue come to a test the bill in the form to Congress should be subjected to all the qualified voters in the District of Columbia. It further advocated that there should be ample compensations to unwilling owners who were no doubt the victims of a popular cause. Propaganda was also started urging the slave holders to increase the value of their slaves from \$350 to \$500 thereby discouraging those who favored emancipation by compensation.

The interpretation placed upon the foregoing proposals and amendments was to the effect that the authors planned even to reduce the "gradual" process of emancipation to a stubborn resistance by weighing down the original document with amendments too grievous to be borne.<sup>17</sup>

The arguments were not less interesting in the House of Representatives. Mr. Crittenden of Kentucky led the opposition in this body. He argued that the experience of all their predecessors was averse to any such concessions as the abolition bill granted, and that though Congress was vested with the power to enact such a measure he seriously questioned the wisdom of Congress to exercise it at so critical a time.

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<sup>15</sup> The Washington Evening Star, April 4, 1862.

<sup>16</sup> The New York Tribune, April 4, 1862.

<sup>17</sup> The Daily Globe, April 4, 1862.

He prophesied that should the bill pass it would have a tendency to produce danger and mischief not only in the District of Columbia but throughout the country, and the city of Washington would be converted into a city of refuge where fugitives from all parts of the country would live in idleness and crime.<sup>18</sup>

The final stage of the bill was characterized by an attempt on the part of the pro-slavery element to throw the weight of public opinion in the District of Columbia against it. This was accomplished through a petition presented to Congress by the Mayor of the City of Washington. His message was styled as the embodiment of the wishes of the public in regard to the abolition of slavery in the District. It was claimed in the contention that the citizens of the District did not sanction so radical a move on the part of Congress without seriously reflecting upon the results which would inevitably follow. That the end would justify the means seemed to have been a very doubtful conclusion since the end was not looked upon as a worthy objective.<sup>19</sup> After every available argument had been used both pro and con, the bill as proposed passed the Senate and the House April 3, 1862, and April 11, 1862, respectively. It received the President's signature and became a law April 16, 1862.<sup>20</sup>

Many comments followed the passage of the bill deploring the action of Congress and lamenting the defeat of so vigorous a protest. The following is an extract from a very interesting editorial: "We could have wished that the counsels of the more moderate, not to say the more considerate, of the anti-slavery party in both Houses had prevailed in favor of a gradual measure, and provision for removal and colonization of the manumitted class."<sup>21</sup> This sentence sets forth the general tone and tenor of all the articles contributed by those who fought for a lost cause. The dailies published by the opposite party vied with one another in proclaiming the dawn of a new day for the District of Columbia.

At the time the bill passed there were approximately 15,000 Negroes in the District of Columbia, for the census report of 1860 places the population at 11,131 free and 3,185 slave inhabitants of the District. This gave a total of 14,296, to be increased by the migrants for the next two years. Following this grant of liberty, Washington became the Mecca for the colored people inhabiting the States adjacent to the District of Columbia. This is seen in the enormous increase in popula-

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<sup>18</sup> Congressional Globe, 37th Congress, 2nd Session. Vol. 60, p. 1629.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 1496.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pp. 1526, 1629.

<sup>21</sup> The National Intelligencer, April 12, 1862.

tion which registered 43,404 in 1870, a gain of 29,108 or more than two hundred per cent in one decade.<sup>22</sup>

I

ELECTIVE FRANCHISE

Following the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia the question of manhood suffrage became the great issue. Since they had secured their social freedom, the political freedom was attempted with less misgivings and a greater concerted effort. Public sentiment was brought into play as heretofore and newspapers almost instantly popularized the subject. The National Republican was one of the first to carry an editorial advocating the passage of the suffrage bill on the ground of meritorious service rendered by the group it sought to promote. The following account appeared in a June issue of this daily: "In view of the position assumed by the Republicans yesterday on the suffrage question, we refer with pleasure to the excellent resolutions published elsewhere which were unanimously adopted at the Great Johnson Meeting held at Cooper Institute Wednesday evening. It was right to the point. A man who is fit to fight for the Government ought to be fit to vote under it."<sup>23</sup>

In the following month a mammoth mass meeting was held in Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church located at 11th and K Streets. This meeting had for its purpose the drafting of a memorial to be presented to Congress asking that the rights of suffrage be extended to the colored constituency of the District of Columbia. This meeting paved the way for others which immediately placed themselves on record with similar petitions.<sup>24</sup>

In all these attempts and adventures on the part of the colored people, they were guided by the sane and statesmen-like counsel of many white friends who assumed the role of legal advisers. Mr. James Fishback was one of the first, after the plan was on foot, to suggest means which might secure the desired end. He proposed, since it was estimated that there were not less than 2,000 colored men in the District of Columbia who could read and write, that the influence of these men should be brought to bear in a tangible way. It was pointed out that the most prominent objection that would be urged against allowing Negroes to vote was that they were not sufficiently educated to exercise the sacred duty of the office.

<sup>22</sup> Bureau of Census: Negro Population of U. S., 1790-1915, pp. 57, 218.

<sup>23</sup> The National Republican, June 9, 1865.

<sup>24</sup> The National Intelligencer, July 28, 1865.