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Economic Status

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success in trial and oppression scarcely equalled in the annals of mankind.”⁷⁹

III

ECONOMIC STATUS

In 1862 the Negroes in the District of Columbia were confronted with a serious economic problem brought on by overpopulation. Maryland and Virginia were the two States adjacent to the District and formed the main tributaries of its population. Slavery having been abolished within the District, even Negroes from the extreme Southern States were seeking refuge in her borders. There were about 30,000 inhabitants in 1866 making an increase of about 15,700 in six years. This large population settling in a non-manufacturing city made an economic crisis inevitable and a large per cent of these newcomers were unskilled laborers and adapted only to agricultural life.

Notwithstanding his limited ability, the Negro seized every opportunity through industry and thrift to better his condition. The first Negro bank established in the District of Columbia was the Freedmen Saving Bank. It was chartered by Congress in the Winter of 1864, and placed under the supervision of highly reputable white men who had proved their fidelity to the race. A branch of this bank was opened at 281 G Street and was highly recommended to all the colored citizens who desired to open an account. The following announcement was made by way of advertisement: “Deposits will be received from those who wish to save their money on interest every day from 5 to 7 o'clock P. M., and on Saturdays from 10 A. M. to 3 P. M. All our friends are invited to come and examine this institution.”⁸⁰

Even at this early stage, the Negroes were more than negative factors in the social life of the city, for they learned to economize and out of their meager earnings they had acquired considerable property. As far back as the authentic history of the Negro in the District of Columbia reaches, we find him to be an economic asset. This was true in the establishment of the first public schools in 1807, which account is given in a previous reference. One of the first provisions made to put the schools in the District on self supporting basis was to appropriate the income of a ten per cent tax levied on property owned by Negroes in the cities of Washington and Georgetown. This act was passed by Congress May 21, 1862.⁸¹

⁷⁹ U. S. Commissioner of Education for the D. C., 1868, p. 222.

⁸⁰ The National Republican, September 11, 1865.

⁸¹ Educational Documents, p. 53.

In the memorial presented to Congress by the Negroes asking for the elective franchise they predicated their claims on property rights. This memorial ran as follows: "The first statement of our memorial is that a large number of our colored people are property holders, that they pay no unconsiderable amount of taxes but are nevertheless as slaves as to its distribution. Unlike other tax payers, they see the proceeds of their labor taken and disposed of without a single voice."⁸²

One Mr. W. H. Moore, President of the Common Council, made a statement to the effect that the Negroes could not base their claims upon property rights for the limited amount of property owned by them would not warrant such a concession. The property assessed to Negroes, according to his statement, did not exceed the sum of \$40,000 for the whole city of Washington. However, it was ascertained from the census report that in one square, No. 198, colored property holders were rated as follows: Martin Mason, \$600; Ignatus Bond, \$2,137; Bond in name of L. B. Harding, \$682; H. E. McCoy, \$1,337; John Bond, \$1,959; G. Snowden, \$3,980; A. Cook, \$1,534; H. Fletcher, \$891; Charles Wilson, \$1,056; A. Baten, \$291; S. Brown, \$1,156; R. Vagle, \$1,156; Matilda Madison, \$951; E. Neale, \$880; Thomas Payne, \$850; William Shorter, \$703; J. A. Gray, \$3,263; C. A. Steward, \$3,530; Charles Middleton, \$850; William Cook, \$4,884; Lewis, \$1,614; J. F. Cook, \$11,288. The total amount of property assessed to Negroes in this one square aggregated \$45,592, which was \$5,592 more than was claimed that they owned in the whole city.

The petition further stated: "If the above does not show falsity of Mr. Moore's statement, then I call attention to property owned by colored citizens in Georgetown. They have the names of 102 citizens whose property is assessed at \$87,377, and taxes (some special taxes included), \$946.51."⁸³ According to the petition the amount named did not include all the property owned by the Negroes but only so far as the Committee had been able to investigate and collect.

The second clause emphasized that the Negroes were intelligent enough to be industrious, to have accumulated property, to build and sustain churches and schools. Since there was no accurate account kept of property owned by Negroes, it is impossible to state definitely just what their economic status was at this time in the District of Columbia. The Colored Citizens Equal Rights Association was in possession of a few statistics dealing with the wealth of citizens and it stated that if all the property owned by Negroes was valued according

⁸² The Daily Morning Chronicle, December 19, 1865.

⁸³ The Daily Morning Chronicle, December 19; 1865.

to the census of the District of Columbia, \$1,500,000 would be credited to them.⁸⁴

The great problem that confronted the colored people in the District was the problem of employment. One phase of that problem was that the newcomer was not accustomed to the kind of work which was available and often had to resort to that type of work which afforded but little remuneration. Another problem was that of inequality in the distribution of work offered. The monopoly rested with those of political power and influence which at once excluded the colored people. In order to counteract some of these conditions there was established, in connection with the Bureau of Refugees Freedmen and Co., the Intelligence Offices. The purpose of this department was to furnish employment to all those who had become victims to the unorganized labor system.

This agency greatly relieved the poor and reduced the number of those who were idle. The following is an account of the type of work accomplished: "The Intelligence Offices of this city and Alexander during the month of December last received 168 applications for employment. Furnished employment to 135 persons."⁸⁵

Occasionally we come across exceptions to this general rule of poverty and suffering among the Negroes. There is an account given of one Alfred Lee who owned a piece of the most valuable property in the city of Washington. He was a well known man and highly respected by both white and colored alike. His business was that of a feed dealer which brought him large returns, and in the course of time he purchased the elegant mansion on H Street which had been occupied by the British Minister to America.⁸⁶

Another striking example of industry and thrift among Negroes was seen in the property accumulated by the unskilled laboring class. A huckster, David Atkins, was a man of considerable wealth and influence. He died when about sixty years old at his residence on 8th and Pennsylvania Avenue. It was discovered at his death that he had saved between \$25,000 and \$30,000. He was reputed to have been well educated and highly respected by all who knew him of both races.⁸⁷

The problem of support was due to unorganized labor and not to indolence and shiftlessness as was claimed. This can readily be appreciated by reports from various organizations and newspaper articles.

⁸⁴ The Daily Morning Chronicle, December 19, 1865.

⁸⁵ The Washington Evening Star, January 8, 1866.

⁸⁶ The National Intelligencer, October 26, 1865.

⁸⁷ The Daily Morning Chronicle, January 4, 1866.

The Evening Star, in giving a synopsis of the economic conditions among Negroes in the District of Columbia, had the following to say: "The report of the Freedmen Relief Association read at the annual meeting on Monday stated that the pecuniary condition of the freedmen in the District of Columbia is not materially changed nor can it be much better until the fundamental law of demand and supply, in relation to labor, is established. So long as there remains a surplus of 15,000 laborers in Washington of small capital and no agricultural or mechanical interest a large percentage among them must remain as now, in poverty."⁸⁸

The strong competition that the Negroes had to face together with organized prejudice in the economic field of endeavor, created quite a problem for business in general. Many subtle attempts were made to impede the progress. Some of them were thrown out of employment because they voted the Republican ticket against the will of the employer. The most serious of these fraudulent moves was the one directed against the Freedmen Saving & Trust Co. It was rumored that since the appropriation made by Congress to the Freedmen's Bureau had been vetoed by the President, it would only be a matter of time for the Freedmen's Saving Bank to become insolvent. Soldiers and other persons who had money deposited were urged to draw their funds from the Bank at once.

So great was the rush that more than \$1,000 was withdrawn in one day. The false report was so disastrous to the future of the Bank that J. W. Alvord deemed it necessary to make a public plea to the friends of the colored people urging them to hold faith with the Bank. It was claimed that this piece of strategy was the work of persons who coveted the financial success of the colored people and others who lounged around the camps occasionally for opportunities to swindle the Negroes out of their earnings. Whatever was the motive, the fact remains that these people had accumulated bank accounts sufficient to excite envy of the white race.

The white men were not desirous of admitting this newly emancipated group into their trade guilds and neither were they inclined to recognize his class of labor on par with theirs. As a result the Negro did not make the economic progress he was capable of making because he could not fill the positions that his qualifications fitted him for. Being thus hampered, many of the colored people sought employment in Northern sections and parts of the West. As an inducement these places offered equal opportunities under an organized system of labor.

⁸⁸ The Washington Evening Star, May 8, 1867.

The Freedmen's Bureau and the National Freedmen Relief Association were instrumental in transporting Negroes from the District of Columbia to the distant places for employment.

The Relief Association applied for and obtained transportation for 530 laborers who settled in Providence, R. I., and within twelve months these freedmen had more than justified the wisdom of the change. In this group were two Green brothers who by their industry and thrift deposited jointly \$390 the first year of their arrival.⁸⁹ In the early part of the economic struggle the enemies blamed Congress for the situation that obtained in the District of Columbia. They claimed that the Negroes would have vacated the city had it not been for the promise of suffrage held out to them by that body. The thrill of this anticipated privilege not only retained the colored people, but gave impetus to a stream of migrants who came from all sections of the country seeking this new experience.

This ambition was discouraged, as far as possible, by the white element who urged that the hope be abandoned on the part of the colored people. One writer went so far as to prophesy evil results that would grow out of making such concessions to a class of people that was least prepared for them. Aside from the effect it would have upon the Negroes themselves, the District of Columbia, the seat of the National Government, would become the "Botany-bay of darkeydom."⁹⁰ Notwithstanding the fact that the Negroes faced all such foreboding, they deposited in the Freedmen's Bank the same year \$4,369.05 for the month of January.⁹¹

In the 3rd Annual Report of the Freedmen Relief Association it was stated that immediately following the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia the labor market became overstocked and employment was placed at a high premium. Had it not been for the limited supply of work given out by the hospitals, cavalry service, Navy yard and War department many families would have not only suffered privations but possibly extinction. Most of these were widows with large numbers of children who were dependent solely upon their mothers for support.⁹² These mothers had to labor under great odds for it was discovered in the reports that not more than twenty-five out of nine hundred families paid less than \$4.00 per month for house rent and not over fifty families less than \$5. These same women paid \$25.00

⁸⁹ Fourth Annual Report of the National Freedmen R. Association, p. 8.

⁹⁰ The Washington Evening Star, April 14, 1866.

⁹¹ Ibid. January 1, 1866.

⁹² Third Annual Report of the Freedmen's R. Association, p. 4.

and \$30.00 for ground rent of the poorest kind, yet they purchased shanties out of their means.⁹³

The following gives a graphic picture of these conditions as represented among the unfortunates of the District: "It is impossible to judge which of their wants is most imperious at the present time, that of food, fuel, clothing, or bedding. Within a few days an old woman sat in her bed in a shanty where the melted snow was dripping down on her pallet of rags, unable to lie down alone. There was no appearance of fire or wood and in the house nothing to eat. She had begged a match which lay on a stool by her bed, that she might light it in the night, as she said, to make the night seem shorter. A few squares away are Sally Clayton, daughter and two grandchildren. The husbands of both these women are at Key West in Government employ. The daughter with a young infant, undressed, with no fire, no bread and no means to get either, has nearly perished already."⁹⁴

In the census report given by Dr. F. B. Hough for the District of Columbia there appears a table of statistics setting forth the following facts: The population was estimated at 38,366, owners of real estate 1,399. In the Government service 822. Personal service 3,647. In trades and finance 98. Owning and working land 245, artists and mechanics 577. The ratio of the colored population to the white shows that a larger per cent of Negroes were real estate owners than was found among the whites according to population. They also stood on basis of equality with the whites in the reduction of renters.⁹⁵

One can better appreciate the economic value of the colored people when viewed in the light of adverse circumstances through which they passed. In 1866 the total population of Washington and Georgetown was placed at 31,549 colored, and of this number only 5,000 could find employment in the District of Columbia. This left a total of 26,549 to face the crisis, and yet they maintained a respectable record. It was stated that at the outbreak of the Civil War the Negroes owned \$650,000 worth of real estate in the District of Columbia and in 1867 one fifth of the owners of real estate were Negroes.⁹⁶

In March 1867 there was a deposit made with the Freedmen Saving Bank amounting to \$1,434.92; this shows that the progress along financial lines was not checked by the problems of society. In the same year the population of the colored people in the District was 38,663 or 30.45 per cent of the whole population. Of this number there

⁹³ Third Annual Report of the Freedmen R. Society, p. 4.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹⁵ U. S. Commissioner of Education for D. C., 1868, pp. 39-40.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

were about 15,903 regularly engaged in some form of work. According to the census of these two consecutive years, 10,903 more people were employed in 1867 than in 1866 with very nearly the same population for the District.⁹⁷

It can readily be seen that from the foregoing statistics the Negroes were not only consumers but contributors as well, and that the economic problem was not the result of a greater demand for labor than a supply but the reverse.

Many appeals were made encouraging the colored people to migrate in mass to sections further north, but there was no inclination on their part to accept the offer. They chose rather to remain in the District of Columbia and work out their own economic problem. In this view, some of the leading white friends of the city shared heartily, and advocated that the colored people could better work out their destiny on indigenous soil. The following statement touches on this subject: "It has been suggested in some quarters that measures should be taken to compel their removal, in large bodies to the several States, where their labor can be made available. Whatever may be the judgment of others, we are decidedly of the opinion that the instincts of these freedmen should be respected in this matter, and that the adoption of any coercive means should be discountenanced as a measure of extreme injustice to those whom Providence has emancipated."⁹⁸

Despite conditions as stated above, the colored people maintained a record for industry and thrift that challenges the admiration of every close observer. At the close of the Reconstruction Period, the city Directory⁹⁹ gives an encouraging account of their activities in the various trades set forth as follows:

| | | | | | |
|---------------------|-----|---------------------|----|---------------------|-----|
| Artists | 1 | Fruit Dealers | 3 | Restaurants | 17 |
| Assessor | 1 | Grain Dealers | 2 | Sailors | 25 |
| Bakers | 17 | Grave Diggers | 2 | School Teachers ... | 10 |
| Barbers | 135 | Gravel Roofers | 5 | Scamstresses | 80 |
| Bartenders | 12 | Grocers | 20 | Servants | 360 |
| Blacksmiths | 75 | Hair Dressers | 10 | Sextons | 12 |
| Boatmen | 5 | Hostlers | 60 | Shoemakers | 115 |
| Book Agents | 1 | Hucksters | 30 | Shoe Stores | 2 |
| Brickmakers | 35 | Laundresses | 35 | Soapmakers | 1 |
| Butchers | 35 | Lawyers | 1 | Soldiers | 15 |
| Cabinet Makers | 10 | Machinists | 2 | Stonemasons | 5 |
| Carpenters | 133 | Maids | 10 | Students, Howard .. | 26 |
| Cartmen | 25 | Mechanics | 2 | Tailors | 20 |

⁹⁷ U. S. Commissioner for the District of Columbia, p. 28. 1868.

⁹⁸ Third Annual Report of the Freedmen R. Association, p. 9.

⁹⁹ The City Directory of Washington, D. C., 1870.

| | | | | | |
|--------------------|-----|----------------------|-----|----------------------|-----|
| Caulkers | 1 | Messengers | 85 | Tanners | 15 |
| Coachmen | 25 | Moulders | 1 | Teamsters | 80 |
| Cooks | 270 | Musicians | 8 | Upholsterers | 10 |
| Coopers | 10 | Nurses | 55 | Undertakers | 1 |
| Clerks | 10 | Oyster Dealers | 35 | Variety Stores | 2 |
| Drivers | 110 | Packers | 2 | Waiters | 410 |
| Dyers | 2 | Painters | 15 | Watchmen | 8 |
| Engineers | 10 | Photographers | 3 | Washwomen | 168 |
| Expressmen | 2 | Physicians | 8 | Well-diggers | 5 |
| Farmers | 15 | Plasterers | 35 | Wheelwrights | 7 |
| Feed Dealers | 8 | Policemen | 5 | Whitewashers | 50 |
| Firemen | 15 | Porters | 220 | Woodsawyers | 50 |

IV

LEGAL STATUS

The Negroes in the District of Columbia were confronted with problems of the same magnitude relative to the law as found elsewhere, and even more, for the final word, on every concession made to them or every right withheld from them, was the voice of the law. The crux of the whole question was the inference that the framers of the Constitution did not legislate with the Negro in view as a citizen but chattel, and the statutes that were placed in the Constitution dealing with the inalienable rights of citizens did not apply to the Negroes. For the Negro to assert his claim to equal justice before the law was a recognition not at once granted by those who labored under apprehensions as stated above in reference to the Constitution.

This was the situation that obtained in the District of Columbia during the Reconstruction. The first attempt to elevate Negroes to legal basis of equality with the whites in the District was made by Charles Sumner who presented a bill in Congress validating Negro testimony in the District Courts.¹⁰⁰ This was a bold stroke at legal justice for a class of people who were considered below the level of citizenship. The introduction of this bill in Congress provoked an unusual discussion. After long drawn out arguments arising from this clash of opinion, the bill passed and became a law April 3, 1862. This law was a direct check on the whites in bringing and disposing of cases before the courts to the satisfaction of their own prejudices without a single dissenting voice from the colored constituency. A further step in the same direction was taken when the right to serve on juries was accorded the Negroes. This gave them the opportunity to

¹⁰⁰ U. S. Commissioner's Report on the D. C., pp. 319-322. 1868.