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Colored People in New England

Washington, D.C., Oct. 10, 1889.

To the Editor of The Evangelist:

Dear Sir: - In your letter of Sept. 26th, entitled "Relations of Whites and Blacks in the South as compared with the North - Is there a Color Line in New England?" there are some erroneous statements, which I should like to correct. I think you will willingly accord me this privilege, as you say that you should be glad to be corrected if you have made mistakes. As I am identified with the people of whom you write, I am naturally anxious that no statements in regard to them should be published which are not strictly in accordance with the facts; especially at this time, when the tendency all over the country is to depreciate them.

First, in regard to the colored people in New England, you say "In half the country there was no effort to keep them down; for slavery was abolished a century ago. From that time the black man has had every right that belongs to his white neighbor," etc. . . . "With such advantages, a race that had natural genius ought to have made great progress in a hundred years." But in fact, it is less than half a century since colored people, even in free Massachusetts, were denied the privilege of attending the public schools, and of riding in the public conveyances. Frederick Douglass was forcibly ejected from a stage coach running from Salem to Lynn, and there were other instances of the kind. You are doubtless familiar with the story of Prudence Crandall, who for attempting to establish a boarding school for colored girls

in Canterbury, Conn., was most outrageously persecuted and insulted by the citizens of the place, and finally imprisoned and her schoolhouse set on fire. Through the influence of these citizens upon the Legislature, a "Black Law" was enacted, forbidding any person to establish in the State any school, academy, or literary institution for the instruction or education of colored persons who are not inhabitants of the State, "without the consent in writing first obtained of a majority of the civil authority, and also of the select men of the town, in which such school, academy, or literary institution is situated," etc. We are told that, "on the receipt of the tidings that the Legislature had passed the law, joy and exultation ran wild in Canterbury. The bells were rung and a cannon fired until all the inhabitants for miles around were informed of the triumph."

In another New England town, a schoolhouse was fired into and afterward destroyed, because Henry Highland Garnett and other colored young men were admitted as students. In view of such facts as these and many others that could be adduced, showing the same spirit, is it quite fair to say that for a century in New England "the black man has had every right that belongs to his white neighbor," and that "with such advantages, a race that had natural genius ought to have made great progress in a hundred years"?

Now as to the present condition of the colored people in New England, you say "I look about me here in New England and I see a few colored men; but what are they doing? They work in

the fields; they hoe the corn; they dig potatoes; the women take in washing. I find colored barbers and whitewashers, shoeblacks and chimney-sweeps; but not a colored man who has grown to be a merchant or a banker, a judge or a lawyer to practice even in the petty courts, a member of the Legislature or a justice of the peace, or even a selectman of the town. In all of these respects they remain where they were in the days of our fathers."

In answer to this I send you the following facts, which have been forwarded to me by my brother-in-law, A. H. Grimke, a lawyer, who has been long a resident of Massachusetts: "There are about a dozen colored lawyers in Massachusetts, a majority of whom are justices of the peace. There has been a colored man in the Legislature every year since 1882. Prior to that period, there was a colored member of the Legislature every second or third year since the close of the war. Twice during these periods, two colored men were members at the same time. Every year there are three or four colored members of the Republican State Convention, and this year there was a colored member of the Democratic State Convention as well. Mr. J. C. Chappelle is at present a member of the Republican State Central Committee. In my own town of Hyde Park, a colored man is Sealer of Weights and Measures. If you will allow a personal reference, I am one of the trustees of a public institution (the Westborough Insane Hospital), recognized as one of the most important in the State, and I am, in addition, Secretary of the Board. The expenditures of this hospital are about \$100,000 a year. Judge Ruffin was

appointed Judge of the Charlestown Municipal Court in 1883, and filled the position with credit to himself and the community until his death about three years afterwards. Dr. Grant is one of the best dentists in Boston, and has a large practice among both races. He is a man of inventive skill in his profession. His invention in relation to cleft palates is well known here and elsewhere. Besides, he has been for years an instructor in the Dental College connected with Harvard University - mechanical dentistry being his department. John H. Lewis has a merchant tailoring establishment in Washington Street, Boston, and does the second largest business in New England. His transactions annually exceed \$100,000; he has just started a branch store in Providence, R. I. Mr. Joseph Lee is owner and proprietor of one of the first-class hotels of the East. The richest people of the State are guests at the Woodland Park Hotel, at Auburndale. His business is rapidly increasing, he has already enlarged the original building, and is about to enlarge a second time to meet the increasing demands of the public. The property is valued at about \$120,000. Beside Mr. Lewis above mentioned, there are three colored merchant tailors doing a handsome business in Boston. "In New Bedford, one of the largest and finest drug stores is owned and conducted by a young colored man. In that city the colored people are butchers, fruiterers, grocers, master ship-builders, etc. Colored young women have taught in the public schools of Boston within the past few years, and one, Miss Baldwin, has been for some years one of the most popular teachers in the public schools of Cambridge."

What is true of the condition of the colored people in New England, is true of their condition in the Northern States generally and in many of the Southern States. Among them you will find numbers of lawyers, doctors, teachers, professors in colleges, merchants, etc.

Here in the city of Washington there are not a few colored men who are engaged in real estate business. There are also brokers, bankers, successful lawyers and physicians, besides scores of teachers.

Again, you say of the slaves, they "multiplied like the Israelites of Egypt; but no Moses rose up among them to lead them out of the house of bondage." Allow me to say the cases are not parallel. Moses was raised up and divinely appointed to lead the people out of bondage. The thought did not originate with him. The fact is, he shrank from the task, and endeavored in every possible way to excuse himself when God called him to the work. Nor was he a poor degraded slave, without opportunities of self-improvement, but a man brought up as a member of the household of Pharaoh, and trained in all the wisdom of Egypt.

But in spite of seemingly overwhelming obstacles, in spite of the weight of oppression and prejudice, leaders, in one sense, did arise among the colored people. Such men as Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnett, Samuel R. Ward, and others - men who were born slaves - did much by their energy, eloquence, and ability to create that public sentiment which led ultimately to the overthrow of slavery.

As to the colored soldiers in the late war, you say "though they were brave enough in the ranks, yet no one had the natural capacity to command." May I ask what authority you have for this statement? There were colored officers who acquitted themselves honorably, and the fact that there were no colored colonels or generals, may readily be accounted for by the strong prejudice, which prevented the Government from employing colored troops at all, until it was forced to do so from sheer necessity. Many of them displayed distinguished bravery; there may have been many a Toussaint among them, but no matter how great their capacity to command, there was no chance for promotion in the face of the cruel and unjust prejudice which they had to encounter. I would like to refer you to a book entitled "The Black Phalanx," by Joseph P. Wilson, which gives a full and deeply interesting account of the bitter opposition manifested to the employment of colored troops, and of the great services rendered by them during the war.

As to social equality, you are entirely mistaken in supposing that the colored people, either North or South, have any desire to intrude themselves upon the whites. They have intelligence enough to know that social equality is a matter which must be regulated entirely by individual preference. They only want their rights as men and as American citizens. They also have a right to expect to be treated in a Christian spirit by the professed followers of Christ, and to expect from those who claim to be their "best friends," a fair and kindly criticism, uninfluenced by the prejudices and

calumnies of their enemies. If these friends would take the trouble to inform themselves as to the real progress and present condition of the colored people, I think they would not feel so much "discouraged," nor labor under the astonishing delusion that they are "just where they were a hundred years ago."

- Charlotte F. Grimke.