

CULTURAL PROGRESS (OF THE) NEGRO IN NOVA SCOTIA

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NOVA SCOTIA, with a population of 621,000 according to the 1945 estimate, has a negro population of approximately 13,000. In other words, the Negro population of the Province is a little over two per cent. Although generally found in distinct communities, there is scarcely a large centre which does not have a few Negro residents. The trend of the population has followed the general pattern of the Province in that there has been a general decline of the rural population, with an increase in the urban centres, until to-day we might say that the urban-rural ratio stands at about 5 to 8. I have based my calculations on seventeen distinct Negro communities and thirteen urban centres which have groups of Negroes. The history of the communities would date back to the emigration of refugee Negroes during the American War of 1812. D. C. Harvey, in his documentary study of "The Establishment of the Negroes in Nova Scotia," gives a very detailed account of the establishment of these communities, whose settlers were evacuated by British ships of war and brought to Halifax. Two thousand were brought during the year 1815 and eventually settled on Crown lands in Preston, Halifax County. It is needless to say that they were poor and uneducated. It was hoped by the authorities that they would be able to carry on market gardening and supply the city, but they had been accustomed to good soil, warm climate and a little inducement from the whip; thus barren rocks and trees of Preston failed to create industry in these early refugees. The authorities who were interested in helping became somewhat discouraged. During this period the Earl of Dalhousie wrote: "Permit me to state plainly to your Lordship that little hope can be entertained of settling these people so as to provide for their families and wants—they must be supported for many years—slaves by nature and education, no longer working under the dread of the lash, their idea of freedom is idleness and they are therefore quite incapable of industry." This statement is significant for two reasons, first it reveals the status of these people who were to make their homes in Nova Scotia and, secondly, it reveals a change in attitude on the part of the officials of the Province

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that may or may not indicate the general feeling toward these new immigrants. Whatever the attitude was towards those who were in the Province it was evident that it was not the intention of the government to permit any further mass movements into the country by Negroes, for in March, 1834, the following resolution was passed: "Whereas it is feared that upon the Negroes being emancipated from their slavery in the British West Indies, the Bermudas and the Bahama Islands, numbers of them may be brought into this Province, and prove a great burden to the community. Resolved that a select commission be appointed to consider the best means of preventing the introduction of Paupers into this province." A bill was introduced but was not allowed by the Imperial Government. Yet there has been no great movement of Negroes to the Province since that period. The first four years saw the government maintaining a relatively close watch over the Negro settlement, providing regular rations, clothing and seed. This was later modified to the issuing of small grants to various communities for seed and meal as the need presented itself; this continued over a period of approximately thirty years, at which period the people were left on their own.

Degree of Organization

The response of these people to their new environment during the first forty years is rather incredible as it is revealed through their degree of organization. Churches were organized as early as 1812, and in 1854 the first meeting of the African Baptist Association of N. S. was held at Granville Mountain, now known as Granville Ferry. This work was undertaken by Richard Preston, a former slave who had been sent to England, where he was educated, ordained and given funds to purchase land and erect a Church at Halifax, which is now known as the Cornwallis Street Baptist Church. Preston did not confine himself to Halifax but travelled extensively, and by 1854 had organized eleven churches, which formed the African Baptist Association. This work has played a vital part in the development of the people, who carried with them from the South a rich spiritual experience. The church has been the centre of Negro culture and every phase of his life has been influenced by it. It stands to-day as the unifying force in the lives of the people throughout the Province. Ninety per cent of the Negro people in the Province are either members or adherents of the Baptist denomination. To-day in Nova

Scotia there are only three congregations of other denominations. The church has afforded an opportunity for self expression, the development of leadership, the sponsoring of education. Negro music had its inception through the spiritual life of the people, and from the churches have come singers of international fame. I need only mention the name of Portia White, the daughter of the late Rev. W. A. White. A Negro Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons was organized as early as 1856 under the Grand Lodge of N. S., and all records would indicate that they were not the least among the brethren in appearance and performance. Later, about 1890, a lodge of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows was organized under the significant name of Loyal Wilberforce, and a lodge of Ancient Foresters flourished at a very early date. There is no evidence in the history of our people of any effort to organize in the interest of their economic welfare, all efforts in this direction being purely individualistic. Neither do we find indications of any effort to organize on a community basis. It appears that all their needs were met through the church, which had its appeal in high emotion and fervor and permitted free exercise of the imagination. The Lodge appealed to his mystical nature and to the *ego* which had long suffered suppression.

Education and Educational Facilities

The Educational progress of the Negro in Nova Scotia is determined by two factors, first the educational background and consciousness of the people, and the existing system of education in the Province.

The Negroes of 1815-18 were refugee slaves and had no opportunity for education; slaves who became educated did so under unusual circumstances. Thus there were none among these people to give leadership in the field of education. The early efforts were made by religious societies of the white community. The later development was a system of grants to school sections: £50 being raised by the section, a government grant of £25 was awarded. This helped in the support of the teacher. The difficulty here was that the Negro school section lacked the money to qualify for the grant and in many instances could not make the capital expenditure for a school house. Many of the early school houses were erected by government and religious societies. It was not until 1864-65 that common schools were made legally free and assessment for their support

made compulsory. This marked the actual beginning of Negro schools; yet in many instances the teachers were poorly trained and rarely paid. The succession of educational legislation, such as free school books, the municipal school unit, and loans for capital expenditure, all of which has taken place within the past ten years, has given a tremendous impetus to the educational development of Negroes. Family allowances have also shown their effects in better attendance and better clothed children. Yet, with all these advantages, educational progress has not been too encouraging. There has always been the difficulty to obtain teachers for the Negro school; for years the teachers were barely literate, and it has only been in recent years that we have had teachers with high school matriculation. It is interesting to note that eighty per cent of the teachers who have taken advantage of Normal School training were children of ministers of the African Baptist churches.

Life in the distinct Negro community has not created a desire for education on the part of the people; attendance of children at school has not been considered an essential as the school has never been associated with the child's post-school life. The chief consideration has been the ability of the boys to go to work to bring in extra money, and the ability of the girls to assist in the duties of the home. There is no record of a Negro student from any of the Nova Scotia settlements either entering or graduating from any of the universities of the Province. During the 135 years of their settlement here, there is a record of only nine Negro university graduates, and of these nine only three can really be called direct descendants of the early settlers, for one was born in the United States and brought here for his education, while the remaining five were children of West African families who came to this country after 1900. It might be well to observe that the three described as direct descendants of the early settlers were educated in urban mixed schools and all three were in close contact with white culture, in that the education of two of them was sponsored by wealthy white individuals, while the third was practically born on a University campus.

Economic Development

The economic status of the Negroes is extremely low, and they have always been considered the source of servants, and for 135 years they have largely been held to this status.

It has been a slow process for the Negro to change this status because of the lack of education and skilled training. Tradesmen among the early slaves were not uncommon; as early as 1751 an advertisement appeared in the Boston *Evening Post* offering for sale slaves who were described as follows: "ten strong, hearty Negro men, mostly tradesmen, such as caulkers, carpenters, sailmakers and rope makers." The sailing vessels have disappeared, and with them the related trades. I, personally, can remember my childhood visits to Halifax and listening to the sea yarns related to me by my maternal grandfather, who, thirty-five years ago, was carrying on a prosperous business as a ship's rigger at that time, and how long before I know not. I am often amused when I think of the petty jangling between my grandfather and the next door neighbor, who was a chimney sweep. Both were considered as West Indians, but they came from different islands; it is a well known fact that the Jamaican and the Barbajan have no dealings, but here they were each with his own independent business, owners of several homes, sending their children to school and giving them musical and other cultural training.

There is definitely a decline in trades among the Negro; the cooper, the blacksmith, the basket maker and broom maker have disappeared with the changing times. The Negro to-day is employed in the major industries of the Province, in the heaviest and lowest paid jobs: agriculture, mining, lumbering, steel, the railway and shipping industries, form the basis of Negro economy. The following represents the various trades and occupations in which there is at least one member of the race, in most cases they are unable to support themselves wholly from this trade, nor in most cases are they members of the Union representing their trade. I shall list twenty-two: carpenters, painters, plasterers, electricians, brick-layers, auto mechanics, cement finishers, sign painters, chimney sweeps, blacksmith, shoe-maker, barber, tailor, printer, hair-dresser, cooper, interior decorator, cook, acetylene welding, tin-smith and roofer. Prior to the last war, girls were limited to teaching school or domestic work; during the war many were employed as stenographers, while the nursing field was opened when two girls graduated in 1949 as registered nurses. One Negro boy was taken the course in pharmacy at Dalhousie University and is serving very capably in a Halifax drug store, two other young men are employed as office clerks in government departments,

several others are employed in the Postal service. Attempts at business are limited to barber shops, beauty parlors, business, trucking, shoe-making, a newspaper and one co-operative store. In the professional field there are two doctors, two lawyers, all of whom came directly from the West Indies, received their education here and remained here to practise, which indicates that they are not truly products of the local culture. The same might be said of the two nurses; although the barrier was removed by the efforts of the slave descendants, it was children of West Indian parentage who took advantage of it. I point out this fact because it has been so evident throughout the history of our people in Nova Scotia and the United States and raises a question that cannot be opened in this paper; yet it is evident that the answer to the difference between the West Indian Negro and the Nova Scotian Negro in cultural development should reveal much that would help us to understand our local problem. The professional field is completed with six ordained ministers and two or three dozen teachers, either active or retired.

Influence of Racial Factor

It is impossible to conclude our discussion without a reference to the racial factor, which inevitably enters the picture. Wherever there are differences there are going to be prejudices, and the greater the difference, the greater the prejudice. Colour is probably the greatest mark of physical differences, a hooked nose, blond hair, slant eyes will sometimes pass unnoticed, whereas the colour of the skin stands out. Much of racial discrimination arises from fear and is both economic and social. It is the business of us all to preserve our own lives and to reproduce new life, and it is when one group threatens the efforts of another in these basic things, that friction arises and the majority group begins to suppress the minority. Thus, as long as Negro men marry Negro women and do not threaten the economic security of whites, or still further do not attempt to storm the subtle barriers of self preservation, there will be no trouble in Nova Scotia. Negro philosophy has been changing; for 135 years the Negro has more or less followed the idea that there were only certain things in the local life that he could expect, but to-day with more education and encouragement from white leaders, he is beginning to see the fallacy of this idea. The result has been that as never before our young folk are entering the high schools, their minds set upon training

themselves for living. The adult educational program received enthusiastic endorsement by Negro communities, and they are organizing, studying and discussing the vital issues of life, to the end that they as citizens might contribute more to the society in which they live and that they might tap a greater percentage of the resources of the country. This is no wild movement filled with emotion and kindled by agitation, but purely the natural phenomenon of the cultural development of any people. My present concern is how will our Christian democracy respond to the surge and demands of a people hitherto silent and isolated, but none the less a part of the great family of God with all the inherent rights that this implies. Will they again be subjected to profound discouragement by a society that can well afford to offer them equal opportunity? If not, let us begin by demanding that our school text books be examined and all that is predatory, objectionable, and without educational value be removed, in order that minority groups will not be offended and the tender spirit of the child suppressed before he knows how to strike back. Let colour and racial clauses be erased from scholarships offered in institutions of learning. Let hotels and restaurants cater to the public on the basis of individual behavior, regardless of race. Let trade unions and employers give opportunity to all who meet the requirements of the particular trade or vocation. If this is done there will be no need for letters of the following type, which is representative of the thought of Nova Scotia's young Negro. I quote from a letter written from Digby, N. S., May 30, 1949, by a young Negro girl:

Dear Mr. Oliver:

I am writing to ask you to find me a job in Halifax for the summer. It is such a problem to get enough money to go through High School and jobs are so scarce down here. There is simply no place in Digby for girls to work at all, and I want to take my "eleven" next term, which will take some money.

If you know where I can get a job in Halifax, would you please let me know! I read the ads in the paper but I don't suppose they hire Coloured girls. Like in—Factory, they wanted girls there for different kinds of jobs, well, I don't suppose they would want Coloured girls.

Well, could you find out if you can place me please, and thank you very much

Yours truly.

Need I say anything further regarding the racial influence? Its results are very evident in this letter: the optimism, confidence and positiveness of purpose—the essentials of life—have been destroyed by this sinister evil. Yet is there not a greater danger: is not this child like many others of the race who are struggling outside the door that leads to life, an easy prey to any false philosophy of life that will offer freedom from the stigma of race? A people of a rich spiritual nature born to be free, how long will they cling to the Old Rugged Cross, while they suffer shame and reproach at the hands of those who claim to be their saviours?