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YOUR NEGRO NEIGHBOR

Benjamin Brawley
Your Negro Neighbor

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Your Negro Neighbor

I

YOUR NEGRO NEIGHBOR

To the People of the United States of America,
Citizens and Patriots:

Our country is still in the midst of the greatest war in the history of mankind. Already our sons and brothers have died in Europe. While the sacrifice is great, and each day comes home more closely to us, there must be no ceasing of the conflict until victory is assured. The principles of Christ must prevail, and democracy must be given some chance in the world. Because we believe this, because we love our country, because we wish to see our country truly noble and great, I am once more asking your attention to the vital subject of the place of the Negro in our American life.

We feel that we may not unreasonably ask a hearing at this time. In the war now raging we have fully done our part, if indeed any American could venture to say that he has done his part. Whether as officers or stevedores our men have borne their share of the brunt of battle. Let it not be supposed that many of them did not enter the conflict with misgiving. They could not readily forget that under our country's flag crimes unspeakable had been committed against them. They could not help remembering that even as they went forth to fight, their sisters and their wives did not have the full protection of the law. They still had faith, however, in the great heart of the American people; and they could not believe that when the nation's finest manhood was being given for the principles of democracy and Christianity, deliberate injustice would indefinitely be tolerated.

We remember of course at this time that public sentiment with reference to the Negro has undergone a great change within fifty years. Immediately after the Civil War there was a spirit, in the North at least, to give him a helping hand, though even here he was not always wanted as a laborer. In a period when feeling ran high there was a tendency to base his rights on the fundamental principles of the republic. Recently, however, in the stress of commercialism, the status of the Negro, along with many other grave moral questions, has been much in the background. Suddenly the war burst upon us and gave us a new era of soul-questioning.

The period of industrialism was formally signalized by one of the most telling speeches ever delivered in this or any other country, all the more effective because the orator was a high-minded, patriotic gentleman. In 1886 Henry W. Grady addressed the New England Club in New York on "The New South." The two preceding decades had been an era of great scandal in the public life of the United States. Grady spoke to practical men, and he knew his ground. He asked his listeners to bring their "full faith in American fairness and frankness to judgment" upon what he had to say. He pictured in brilliant language the Confederate soldier, "ragged, half-starved, heavy-hearted," who wended his way homeward to find his house in ruins and his farms devastated. He spoke kindly also of the Negro: "Whenever he struck a blow for his own liberty he fought in open battle, and when at last he raised his black and humble hands that the shackles might be struck off, those hands were innocent of wrong against his helpless charges." But Grady also implied that the Negro had already received too much attention and sympathy from the North. Said he: "To liberty and enfranchisement is as far as law can carry the Negro. The rest must be left to conscience and common sense." Hence he asked that the South be left alone in the handling of its grave problem. The North took him at his word. Result: Disfranchisement, segregation, and a lynching record that leaves us very little to say about the Turk in Armenia.

To-day the Negro daily suffers such indignities as make the very words Liberty and Democracy a travesty. If he rides in a trolley-car in the South he is assigned a few rear seats. If his part of the car is crowded and seats near the front are vacant, he must still stand. If he takes a train he must ride in a dirty half-coach, the other half being the baggage car; and he enters the railway station by a side-door. In all the cities, even some of the largest, there is a persistent endeavor to restrict his residence to some unfavorable part of the town; witness the segregation struggles in Atlanta, St. Louis, and Baltimore. Places of refinement and refreshment, libraries, parks, etc., are regularly closed to him. If Negro children go to school they stand only a fraction of a chance of getting an education – or a seat. In Massachusetts, of the children from six to fourteen years of age, 93 per cent. are in school. In Louisiana 68.4 per cent. of the white children are in school and 37.4 per cent. of the Negro children. In Birmingham there is a public high school to which Negro students have to pay to go; in all Georgia there is no public high school for Negroes at all. Not long ago a colored man of excellent character and standing boarded a train between Birmingham and Chattanooga, accompanying his sister. Some white men invaded the coach and proceeded to smoke. The colored man protested to the officials, and forthwith both he and his sister received a beating. Such are the incidents that drive the iron into the Negro's soul. We submit that they are altogether unjust and entirely at variance with the principles for which we are at war.

Not only at home, however, do we have to consider the problem. The war has brought us as never before face to face with the whole foreign policy of the United States, especially as regards the mixed races and colored peoples with whom the National Government has to deal. With one country after another the question is raised whether, under her imperialistic policy and the Monroe Doctrine, the United States has acted with the honor and the diplomatic courtesy that the cases demanded. Already, as is well known, in spite of repeated professions of friendship, the whole of South America views the great country at the North with suspicion; and the ultimate reason for the feeling is that in South America the color line is a vanishing quantity, whereas in the United States it is a very definite reality. Chile has not forgotten the gratuitous insults of 1891, nor Brazil our arrogance in 1893. The conscience of the nation is not yet satisfied that we did not for selfish reasons in 1898 force war upon a weaker nation; and the treatment of Colombia in the matter of the Panama Canal Zone was so infamous that ten years afterwards the United States was still wondering just what sum of money would hush the mouths of the Colombian people. In Santo Domingo we have taken away from the people the right to handle their own money; and two years ago in Hayti, ostensibly for the suppression of a revolution, the country was seized, American officers installed, and a Southern white man appointed minister to the country, by tradition one especially jealous of its integrity as a nation. More recently we have purchased St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix, on which islands, let us remember, the population is made up almost entirely of Negroes. In this connection we recall the Indian, remembering that Osceola was captured under a flag of truce. It is the cold, hard truth that the treatment by the United States of all colored or mixed races has been one marked by arrogance, injustice, and lack of honor. Said L.C. Wilson, in writing from Porto Rico to the *American Missionary*: "When the Americans came to the island sixteen years ago there was very little color line, but now it is well established. It has probably been hastened by the presence of many officials from the Southern States. Even the Y.M.C.A. has been compelled to recognize it, and the fine new building is only for white young men."

In the face of such things we go back to fundamentals. The Declaration of Independence says: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States says: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States, or by any State, on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." But above even such noble utterances as these stand the words of Him whom we profess to follow: "Thou shalt love the Lord

thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself."

And who is my neighbor?

We feel that the United States can not long remain in the dilemma of fighting for democracy while at the same time she denies the fundamental principles of democracy at home. We cannot much longer pluck the mote from our brother's eye unmindful at the same time of the beam in our own.

Meanwhile, however, the Negro goes quietly about his work. He has picked cotton and pulled fodder, scrubbed floors and washed windows, fired engines and dipped turpentine. He is not quite content, however, to be simply the doormat of American civilization. Twelve million people are ceasing to accept slander and insult without a protest. They have heard about freedom, justice, and happiness, though these things seemed not for them. They can not quite see the consistency of fighting for outraged Belgians or Armenians so long as the rights of citizens at home are violated. In the words of Foraker, "They ask no favors because they are Negroes, but only justice because they are men."

Yours for liberty and democracy,

Benjamin Brawley.

II

THE NEGRO IN AMERICA: HISTORICAL REVIEW ¹

It was in August, 1619, that a Dutch vessel brought to Jamestown, Va., twenty Negroes, who were sold into servitude. While this event definitely signalized the coming of the Negro for permanent residence within the limits of what is now the United States, it by no means marked his first coming to this country. The records of the Negro extend as far back as the voyages of Columbus. Within a few years after the visits of the great explorer there were several Negroes in the West Indies, and in 1513 thirty assisted Balboa in the building of the first ships made on the Pacific Coast. One of the four survivors of the ill-starred expedition of De Narvaez in 1527 was the Negro Estevanico, to whom belongs the credit of the discovery of the Zuñi Indians and of New Mexico. Nothing from these early years, however, exercised any abiding influence on the history of the Negro in the United States.

The status of the Negro after 1619 was for several decades complicated by the system of indentured labor known as servitude. This applied especially to white servants brought from England; but the first Negroes brought to the country technically fell into the system. According to the New International Encyclopedia, "Servitude became slavery when to such incidents as alienation, disfranchisement, whipping, and limited marriage, were added those of perpetual service and a denial of civil, juridical, marital and property rights as well as the denial of the possession of children." While legislation was enacted earlier in Massachusetts, it was Virginia that in 1661 really led the way for the South in the definite recognition of slavery as a system by saying that Negroes were "incapable of making satisfaction for the time lost in running away by addition of time." The next year the same colony enacted that the status of a child should be determined by that of the mother, which act both gave to slavery the sanction of law and made it hereditary; and thus the system definitely gained a foothold in the oldest of the colonies.

It must not be supposed that the institution of slavery was fastened on the colonies without many doubts and fears. As early as 1688 the Germantown Quakers made a formal protest against the barter of human beings, and moral sentiment developed in other places as well as in Pennsylvania. In the far South, especially in the colony of South Carolina, where the slaves eventually outnumbered the white people, the constant fear of insurrections led to the imposition of heavier and heavier fines on those brought into the country; and for one reason or another Virginia before 1772 passed thirty-three acts looking toward the prohibition of the importation of slaves. Nothing, however, was able to stand in the way of the cupidity of Englishmen who were gaining riches by the traffic; economic considerations were as potent two hundred years ago as now. In the course of the eighteenth century slavery grew by leaps and bounds. By the time of the first regular census in 1790 there were 757,208 Negroes in the states, 19.3 per cent. of the total population. Fifty-nine thousand, three hundred and eleven of these were those who in one way or another had become free. It is important to note that the percentage of total population has never been higher than 19.3. It has in fact steadily declined since 1790, the common figure for recent years being 11 per cent.

As a race there was little to be remarked of the Negro in the colonial period. To those in bondage there was little outlook. Occasionally there was an attempt at an insurrection; but nothing of first rate importance materialized. In 1741 there was a very unhappy panic in New York, then a prosperous town of ten thousand inhabitants. Nine fires in rapid succession led to the report that the Negroes were conspiring to burn the city. All of the eight lawyers of the town appeared against the defendants, who had no counsel and who were convicted on most insufficient evidence. Before the fury was over, fourteen of the Negroes were burned, eighteen hanged, and seventy-one deported.

¹ This chapter is naturally indebted in some degree to the author's "A Short History of the American Negro" (Macmillan, 1913).

Any evidence of progress in this period would of course have to be found among the free Negroes. The position of these people was a very anomalous one. In the South especially very harsh laws were passed against them; but very frequently these were not enforced. In general the class was regarded as idle and shiftless and a breeder of mischief. More and more, however, individuals made their way in gainful occupations. The free Negro might become skilled at a trade; he might buy land; he might even buy slaves; and he might have one gun with which to protect his home. Liberty, however, genuine liberty, he did not possess. In all the finer things of life, the things that make life worth living, the lot that was his was only less hard than that of the slave.

The general period of the Revolution was one of idealism. Humanitarianism and liberalism were in the air, and both principles were exerting a profound influence on English literature and life. In 1772 Lord Mansfield, Chief Justice of England, thrilled all English-speaking people by handing down from the Court of King's Bench the decision that as soon as a slave set foot upon the soil of England he became free. The logic of the position of the patriots, Franklin, Adams, and Jefferson, naturally forced them to defend liberty at all times; and by the time the convention for the framing of the Constitution of the United States met in Philadelphia, at least two of the original thirteen states (Massachusetts and New Hampshire) had positively prohibited slavery, while in three others (Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Rhode Island) gradual abolition was in progress. Under the influence of commercialism and industrialism, however, great convictions gradually declined; and at least two of the three great compromises that entered into the Constitution were a concession to the slaveholding South. Then across the page of history flashed the brilliant figure of Toussaint L'Ouverture, who led the Negro race to obtain its first independent colony outside of the continent of Africa. In America the influence of the chieftain became one of the reasons for the cheap selling of Louisiana, and rendered more certain the prohibition of the slave-trade at the end of 1807. A wave of fear swept over the South, and Georgia and the Carolinas at once passed repressive measures designed especially to restrict the importation of Negroes from the West Indies.

All-potent, however, proved the cotton-gin. Almost suddenly Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana appeared on the map. By 1830 the exports of what then comprised the Southern states amounted to \$32,000,000, and this section had not less than \$2,000,000,000 invested in slaves. As a system of labor, however, in spite of seeming advantages, slavery was not slow in revealing its shortcomings. Its ultimate effects on the South were disastrous. As Rhodes says, "It needed no extensive marshaling of statistics to prove that the welfare of the North was greater than that of the South. Two simple facts, everywhere admitted, were of so far-reaching moment that they amounted to irrefragable demonstration. The emigration from the slave states was much larger than the movement in the other direction; and the South repelled the industrious emigrants who came from Europe, while the North attracted them." It was the rich planter rather than the white man of slender means who profited by slavery, wealth being more and more concentrated in the hands of a few; and in 1860, 41 per cent. of the white men who had been born in South Carolina were living in other states. More and more the South realized that she was not keeping pace with the country's development; and one of her own sons, speaking "simply as the voice of the non-slaveholding whites of the South," set forth such unpleasant truths as that the personal and real property, including slaves, of Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Missouri, Arkansas, Florida, and Texas, taken all together, was less than that of the single state of New York; that representation in Southern legislatures was unfair; that slavery was to blame for the migration from the South to the West; and in short that the system was harmful in every way. Helper's book was proscribed in some quarters; nevertheless it succeeded because, in spite of the fact that it did not rest on the broadest principles of humanity, it did attempt to attack with some degree of honesty a great economic problem.

Meanwhile the sections were being arrayed against each other. The first fugitive slave law had been passed in 1793. The period 1820-60 was marked by five great aggressive steps on the part of the slave power: the Missouri Compromise (1820), the annexation of Texas (1845), the Fugitive Slave

Law (1850), the Kansas-Nebraska Bill (1854), and the Dred Scott Decision (1857). One after another appeared Lundy and Garrison, Parker and Birney, Whittier and Lovejoy, Phillips and Sumner, Lydia Maria Child and Harriet Beecher Stowe; the South replied to the Underground Railroad with a virtual reopening of the slave-trade; John Brown made a raid on Harper's Ferry; and then came the appeal to arms.

And what of the Negro himself in all this period of turmoil and tumult? The inner life of the race was one of furious ferment. Already were there sharp cries for vengeance, for economic freedom, and for the immediate granting of the full privileges of citizenship; and on the other hand there were those who tried to look far into the future with an air of conservatism and philosophy. Naturally there was the appeal to force; the only wonder is that there was not more of this. As early as 1687 a conspiracy among the Negroes in the Northern Neck in Virginia was detected just in time to prevent slaughter. In Surry County in 1710 there was a similar plot, betrayed by one of the conspirators. An attempt in New York in 1712 resulted in the execution of many Negroes. In 1740 some slaves on the coast of South Carolina, under the lead of one of their number named Cato, began an indiscriminate slaughter of the white people in which many lives were lost. Somewhat more ambitious was the effort made in Richmond in 1800 and known as Gabriel's Insurrection. In 1822 an unusually intelligent Negro, Denmark Vesey, the deepest thinker of all Negro insurrectionists, conceived a plan that contemplated nothing less than the total annihilation of the people of Charleston. His plot was divulged, and as a result thirty-five men were executed and thirty-seven banished. For the magnitude of its plan, the care with which it was matured, and the faithfulness of the leaders to one another, Vesey's insurrection was never equaled by a similar attempt for freedom in the United States. Nine years later, however, Nat Turner, the type of the emotional insurrectionist, with the assistance of five other men, actually killed fifty-seven white people before he was stopped. The effect of this revolt upon legislation was immediate. Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, and other states at once passed harshly repressive measures.

Less direct than open revolt, but more effective sometimes, was escape by running away. In general the slaves directed their way to the North or to the swamps such as those in Virginia and Florida. The Dismal Swamp became a famous hiding-place. Soldiers never ventured into the colony, and bloodhounds sent thither did not return. The first Seminole War was very largely caused by fugitives who had been befriended by the Indians, and the second was even more directly so caused than the first.

In the ordinary social life of the Negro, however, the decade after Nat Turner's insurrection was one of the most trying in the history of the race in America. Repressive measures in the Southern states have just been remarked. In the North the free Negro was beginning to feel the force of economic ostracism. In Ohio no Negro was allowed to settle unless he gave bond for his support. When this law and others of similar import began to be put in force in 1829, serious riots prevailed in Cincinnati for three days, in the course of which several Negroes were killed. Mobs in Philadelphia at various times within the period also murdered Negroes.

Meanwhile migration was strongly urged in some quarters as a solution of the problem. Says Dr. DuBois: "As early as 1788 a Negro union of Newport, Rhode Island, had proposed a general exodus to Africa. John and Paul Cuffe, after petitioning for the right to vote in 1780, started in 1815 for Africa, organizing an expedition at their own expense which cost four thousand dollars. Lott Carey organized the African Mission Society in 1813, and the first Negro college graduate went to Liberia in 1829 and became superintendent of public schools... About two thousand black emigrants eventually settled in Hayti."

Even after the Civil War migration efforts were renewed, the Baptists and the Methodists of South Carolina joining hands in 1877 in the formation of the Liberian Exodus Joint Stock Company. As early as 1833, however, in his pamphlet entitled "Thoughts on African Colonization," Garrison

showed the futility of the whole plan as a means of solving the problem of the Negro in the United States, and time has justified his view.

Gradually, in spite of all the discouraging circumstances, hope appeared on the horizon. England emancipated the slaves in her colonies in 1833, and more and more conventions of free Negroes showed an interest in the welfare of the race. A strong foothold began to be gained in certain occupations, such as those of the barber and caterer. Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass appeared on the public platform; the poems of Phillis Wheatley ran through three new editions within four years; Elizabeth Greenfield sang before the royalty of Europe; and the African Methodist Church began to show what it was possible for the Negro to do in organization. By 1850, the year of the Fugitive Slave Law, when things were looking especially dark, the turning of the tide was much nearer than most people imagined. The South was still triumphant; but each new victory had to be more fiercely fought for than the last, and awakened stronger and stronger elements of opposition.

Into the crucible of war of course fell not only slavery, but every other great question of interest to the American people. Free labor, free speech, woman suffrage, the authority of the Federal Government, were all at stake as well as the cause of the Negro. So far as the Negro himself was concerned, one of the first questions that the Northern generals had to settle was what to do with the fugitive slaves that flocked to their standards. In May, 1861, while in command at Fortress Monroe, Major-General Benjamin F. Butler put such men to work, justifying their retention on the ground that, being of service to the enemy for purposes of war, they were, like guns, powder, etc., "contraband of war," and could not be reclaimed. On August 30th of this year Major-General John C. Frémont, in command in Missouri, placed the state under martial law and declared the slaves there emancipated. The administration was embarrassed, Frémont's order was annulled, and he was relieved of his command. The next May, however, Major-General David Hunter, in charge of the Department of the South, issued his famous order freeing the slaves in his territory, and thus brought to general attention the matter of the employment of Negro soldiers in the Union armies. The Confederate government outlawed Hunter, Lincoln annulled his order, and the grace of the nation was again saved; but in the meantime a new situation had arisen. While Brigadier-General John W. Phelps was taking part in the expedition against New Orleans, a large sugar-planter near the city, disgusted with Federal interference with the affairs of his plantation, drove all the slaves away, telling them to go to their friends, the Yankees. Phelps attempted to organize the Negroes who came into troops. Accordingly he too was outlawed by the Confederates and his act disavowed by the Union, that was not ready to take this step. It was not until a great many men had been killed, and until the Emancipation Proclamation had changed the status of the Negro, that steps were taken by the Union for his employment as a soldier. Opinion in his favor gained force after the Draft Riot in New York, when Negroes in the city were mobbed and beaten by the enemies of conscription. Soon a distinct bureau was established in Washington for the recording of all matters pertaining to Negro troops, a board was organized for the examination of candidates, and recruiting stations were set up in Maryland, Missouri, and Tennessee. By the end of 1864 nearly 200,000 Negroes had been enrolled in the army. The exploits of these men at Port Hudson, Fort Wagner, and Fort Pillow are a part of the romance of American History.

The Civil War meant more than the emancipation of four million slaves, with all the perplexing problems that that liberation brought with it; it involved the overturning of the whole economic system of the South. To educate the freedmen, to train them in citizenship, and to give them a place in the new labor system, was all a problem calling for the wisest statesmanship and the largest and most unselfish patriotism. Strange contradictions moreover were frequently in evidence to increase the practical difficulties of the situation. Some Negroes, because of personal attachment, refused to leave their former masters; while the South in general, although it laid all its ills at the door of the Negro, violently opposed any considerable effort to have him taken away.

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