

Negro Progress in Virginia

Booker T. Washington

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THE members of the colored race who live outside of Virginia are beginning to grow somewhat jealous of the progress which our race is making in this commonwealth. The Negro race in Virginia is going forward, in my opinion, in all the fundamental and substantial things of life, faster than the Negro himself realizes and faster than his white neighbor realizes. I say this notwithstanding there are many existing weaknesses and much still to be accomplished. This progress which Virginia Negroes are now experiencing is owing to two causes.

First, they have been fortunate for a number of years in having governors with foresight, vision, liberality, and courage; and in having superintendents of education and other state officials who have considered the interests, prosperity, and progress of all the people, regardless of race and color. Though I have done so at a distance, I have watched with the greatest interest and satisfaction the interest which Governor Mann has shown in the education and uplift of all the people in this state. Governor Mann is in the highest degree a model executive. It is because of the leadership and guidance of such state officials that the Negro in Virginia has gone forward as fast as he has. I have always noticed that the character of the colored race in any community or state is patterned very largely after the character of the white people in that community or state.

The second reason why the Negroes of Virginia have made, and are making, such great strides, grows out of the fact that they are blessed with the leadership and guidance of such level-headed, conservative, safe unselfish, and able colored men as Major R. R. Moton, the leader in the Negro Organization Society, and dozens of others I could mention.

The Negro Organization Society has for its object the unifying and focusing of all the organizations among our people in Virginia on certain fundamentals of life, such as education, health, and cleanliness. It is not the purpose of this Society to seek to interfere with the special work and purpose of any of the individual organizations represented, but to co-operate with them so as to promote education in its broadest sense, without which there can be no permanent prosperity. The work which it is doing under the general direction of Major Moton, Prof. J. M. Gandy, of Petersburg, the Rev. A. A. Graham, of Phoebus, and others equally interested, is worthy of all praise and encouragement.

The work of this Society is fundamental. It touches the life and the interests of every white citizen in Virginia. I have watched its growth with a great deal of interest and I believe that it is one of the most potent factors for our uplift. Here is a great example of co-operation. It is sometimes said that black people cannot get together and work for the general improvement of a community, but we have here, in a great state, an example of Negro organizations, of every sort, with diverse interests, being able to get together and co-operate for better schools, better farms, better homes, better morals, and better health.

I find that for educational improvement in Virginia during the past year this Society assisted in raising money for the building of schools to the value of \$10,000, that in one county it aided in raising \$900 for school improvement and extension of school terms, also that a large number of schools were inspired to make adequate provision for ventilation, as well as to have individual drinking cups, sanitary outhouses, and improved surroundings.

I am especially interested in the efforts which are being made for better morals among our people. Special emphasis is being placed upon the idea that parents should devote more time and thought to the rearing of their children, and that they should inculcate in their offspring correct habits of morality.

One of the greatest things that the Negro Organization Society is doing is that of improving the health of the masses of the black people throughout Virginia. At the last meeting of the National Negro Business League, I was particularly interested in the report that Professor Gandy gave concerning the work of this Society. Among other things, he told about the "Clean-up Day" that the Negroes of Virginia had last April, when 100,000 Negroes were influenced to observe the day. I am especially pleased to know of the hearty response and sympathetic

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co-operation that were shown by the white people, and by the white papers in reporting this state-wide "Clean-up Day." I was particularly pleased to note the editorials in the Times-Dispatch and other leading white papers of the state, commending the effort and calling upon the white citizens to use their influence with the colored people in their employ to get them to observe the day. I was equally gratified to observe the great interest that the colored people themselves manifested and the large amount of work they did in cleaning up Virginia.

The Bible tells us that cleanliness is next to godliness. When the colored people in a great state like Virginia all get together and co-operate for a general housecleaning — whitewashing their houses, fences, and outbuildings, cleaning out their wells and springs, and seeing that their schoolhouses and homes are properly ventilated — this people is making progress, not only along health lines, but also along educational and religious lines. Through the Organization Society the Negroes of Virginia are contributing, not only towards their ownimprovement, but also towards the improvement of the state as a whole.

Virginia is setting a great example for the remainder of the South in the matter of showing how the white and colored people may co-operate for general improvement. I find that not only have the efforts of the Negro Organization Society received the hearty support of the white people of the state, but that other special lines of endeavor have likewise received their most cordial support. This is particularly true in the matter of education. Virginia was the first state to have a state supervisor of rural colored schools, and by so doing set an example for the remainder of the South. The work of Mr. Jackson Davis in improving the Negro schools of Virginia is an indication of how the best white people of the South are ready to give their time and talent for the betterment of conditions among Negroes.

It has been my pleasure, under the auspices of Hampton Institute, to make several trips recently, with Major Moton and others, through the tidewater counties of Virginia, and in each one of those counties I was most gratified at the evidences of progress on the part of our race in getting land, building better houses, establishing schools and churches, and in contributing their part toward law and order and a higher and better civilization. In Gloucester County, for example, we found that there was not a single individual of either race in the county jail. That is a record which can be mentioned by few counties, North or South, or indeed anywhere in the United States.

In Virginia there are about 675,000 black people, and I find that they are making considerable progress along religious lines. They are building up-to-date churches which cost from \$10,000 to \$40,000. In connection with the material progress of Negro churches, there is also improvement intellectually and morally. You have here some of the most capable and intellectual ministers among colored people. There are in Virginia about 2000 colored church organizations with a membership of over 300,000. Another evidence of the progress that is being made is the growth in Sunday-school work. There are in the state over 2000 Sunday schools with 13,000 teachers and officers and 115,000 pupils. The value of the church property owned by colored people in Virginia is over \$4,000,000.

Perhaps in no other section of the country is there a body of Negroes who, on the whole, are more progressive than the Negroes of Virginia. Here the first Negro bank was established, and now there are more banks operated by Negroes in Virginia than in any other state. I understand that there are altogether twelve such banks. Richmond has the distinction of having the first Negro bank in the country that is run by a woman.

Along other lines of business Virginia Negroes have made great progress in the past few years. There are today more Negroes in the state than ever before who are operating grocery stores, undertaking establishments, real estate, and other business enterprises. In practically every city in Virginia where there is any large number of Negroes, there are business blocks owned by them.

The most notable progress of the race in Virginia has been along agricultural lines. Thirty-four per cent of all persons engaged in farming in the state are Negroes. Almost one-half of all the Negroes in the state are engaged in farming. There are 48,000 who are operating farms; and they are operating 26 per cent of all the farms in the state. Although Virginia gained only 10,000 in its Negro population, or a little more than one per cent from 1900 to 1910, in the same period the number of Negroes owning farms increased 20 per cent. Something like 2,250,000 acres of land are under the control of Negroes; that is, owned or rented by them. The Negro farmers in Virginia control over \$55,000,000 worth of farm property. This is 123 per cent more than they controlled ten years ago.

These Negro farmers, along with Negro farmers in other parts of the South, are using more and more machinery in their farming operations. Ten years ago they owned \$1,000,000 worth of farm machinery. Now they

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own \$2,000,000 worth. There are 32,000 Negroes in Virginia who own land. No other state has so many. Mississippi is next with 25,000 farm owners among her Negro population. Virginia Negroes own over 1,600,000 acres of land, which is over 300,000 acres more than they owned ten years ago. The remarkable thing about these Negro farmers is that they own over half the land they cultivate. Except in Kentucky, this is true in no other Southern state. I find that, according to the census, in the ten years from 1900 to 1910, the value of land and buildings owned by the Negroes of Virginia increased from \$10,000,000 to \$28,000,000, or 180 per cent.

In the matter of education Virginia Negroes are making progress also, but, as in most of our Southern states, much remains to be accomplished. It is true that a large percentage of the colored population of Virginia cannot read or write. We must not, however, be deceived by the mere fact that a person can read or write. Unless he has received that broader training which enables him to know the object of education, the uses of education, unless he receives that broader training which will make him realize that book education is useless without character, without industry, without the saving habit, without the willingness to contribute his part toward law and order and the highest and best in the community, his mere book education will in many cases mean little or nothing. It is the object of the Negro Organization Society to help the colored people of Virginia to digest their education, to utilize it in the common, ordinary affairs of life for the benefit of white people and black people.

In the foregoing remarks I have merely hinted at some of the instances of progress in Virginia. I have done so to show what can be done, but one must not get the idea that all the work is done or that the Negro race is on its feet. In Virginia, as in other Southern states, we are just beginning to teach the Negro how to make progress and the two races how to co-operate with each other. Under the leadership of such men as Major Moton and such institutions as Hampton and others, we shall soon leave behind all doubt and uncertainty as to the future relations of the two races in the South.

THE question with the Negroes is not one of special proficiency, of success in one direction — the pursuit of knowledge — but of success all around. It is one of morals, industry, self-restraint; of power to organize society, to draw social lines between the decent and indecent, to form public sentiment that shall support pure morals, and to show common sense in the relations of life. — From "Education for Life"

[*] Address delivered before the Negro Organization Society, Richmond City Auditorium, November 7, 1913