

Tension Between the Races

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God cares no less for the souls of the African race that might be won to serve Him than He cared for Israel. . . . Who is it that held these people in servitude? Who kept them in ignorance, and pursued a course to debase and brutalize them, forcing them to disregard the law of marriage, breaking up the family relation, tearing wife from husband, and husband from wife? If the race is degraded, if they are repulsive in habits and manners, who made them so? Is there not much due to them from the white people? After so great a wrong has been done them, should not an earnest effort be made to lift them up? The truth must be carried to them. They have souls to save as well as we.

—The Southern Work, pp. 14, 15.

Within the framework of American history, the nineteenth century was probably the most crucial period with regard to race relations. Racial issues headlined the newspapers as White Americans found themselves in positions of conflict and compromise with ethnic groups such as Blacks, Native Americans (Indians), Hispanics, Orientals, and European ethnics. In each encounter the Caucasian majority had to face its own fears of, and prejudices toward, the minority group. Often sheer, blind prejudice dictated the ways in which minority people were treated until greater contact modified the more extreme views. Some groups, such as Native Americans, though fought and discriminated against, were also romanticized as “noble savages.” In other cases, contact and exposure between the races did little to modify stereotypes held about the minority group. In such situations complex relationships both sociological and psychological mitigated against any real racial harmony or understanding. This was especially true in the case of Afro-Americans.

In order to clearly understand the relationship between Black and White people in America during the nineteenth century, it must be



The Ku Klux Klan epitomized prejudice against Blacks, Catholics, and Jews.

remembered that in the early 1800s the United States was a new nation struggling to establish itself as an independent power, a country with a frail economy supported largely by slave labor. At the end of the century America was a vibrant, highly developed nation with a strong economy, international interests, and rapidly expanding industry. No longer Europe's stepchild, it was now a land of refuge for the Old World's "huddled masses yearning to be free." The brutal Civil War had stripped it of its innocence and its slaves, and the brief Spanish-American War had added to its international prestige and possessions. During these years of significant transformations, Black Americans passed from slavery to freedom; but it was a freedom that many White Americans refused to acknowledge and sought to limit.

These White Americans were unwilling to accept any major change in the pattern of race relations that had become established by the 1830s. In the South at that time, Blacks were slaves, the property of their masters, bought and sold at will, with no rights, liberties, or opportunities. In the North, free Blacks were the victims of segregation and discrimination. Few Northern Whites, even those who were fighting heroically to end slavery, would associate with Blacks. The belief that Black people were subhuman or, at best, inferior humans was almost universal, even among the most enlightened people of the day.

From 1830 until 1860 the United States passed from one domestic crisis to another over the issue of slavery, lurching ever closer to the brink of civil war. During this 30-year period sectional differences involving slavery polarized the nation into two camps, one antislavery and one proslavery. White abolitionists spoke out publicly against slavery and urged that immediate steps be taken to abolish it.

Many of these abolitionists acted on the basis of religious ideals, for the 1830s and 1840s were years characterized by intense religious interest and revival, a period frequently called the Second Great Awakening. The revivals, led by men such as Charles G. Finney and Theodore Dwight Weld, often spoke to issues of social reform, as well as spiritual concerns. Finney, the most prominent evangelist of the day, organized his converts into abolition and temperance societies. Weld, who was once Finney's assistant evangelist, became a full-time abolitionist speaker. Many of Finney's followers became so outspoken in their belief that slavery was wrong that Americans regarded the

evangelical revival and the abolitionist movement as one and the same. In the South this attitude was so prevalent that Finney and his disciples made little headway in stimulating revivals there.

This is not to say that Southerners were solidly supportive of slavery. James G. Birney, a lawyer and son of a wealthy slaveholder, hated the system but could do nothing about it until his father died and he inherited the estate. Birney then freed the slaves, sold the plantation, and headed north. He became a prominent abolitionist writer and editor, and in 1840 ran for the presidency of the United States as the candidate of the antislavery Liberty Party.

The Grimke sisters, Sarah and Angelina, born in South Carolina, were the children of a wealthy plantation owner. When they reached adulthood, they left the South and became antislavery and women's rights speakers. Angelina married Theodore Dwight Weld and joined his antislavery efforts. In 1836 she wrote a lengthy pamphlet, "Appeal to the Christian Women of the South," in which she urged women to use their influence to encourage the men to abandon slavery.

Some Southern churches spoke out against slavery as well. In 1837 the Thirteenth Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky issued a document that criticized slavery and urged its members to abandon the practice. For the most part, however, Southerners and Southern churches defended and supported slavery, while Northern churches generally opposed it. Between 1835 and 1858 the Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist churches split into Northern and Southern sections over the slavery issue.

A number of writers defended slavery along theological, anthropological, and sociological lines. Thornton Stringfellow, a Virginia clergyman and theology professor, defended slavery by arguing that it was a biblical institution, practiced by the patriarchs and endorsed by the apostle Paul. He further argued that Black people should be slaves because their black skin was the mark of Cain.

Thomas Dew, another Southern scholar, defended slavery by arguing that Blacks were an intellectually and morally inferior race that belonged on the lowest level of human development, which he called the "mud sill." Other Southern writers, influenced by String-

fellow and Dew, even argued that Blacks were not part of the original Creation but were the products of illicit relations between men and animals in ancient days.

In contrast, Northerners usually attacked slavery on moral grounds, arguing that it was an institution that dehumanized both master and slave. Numerous incidences of master-slave sexual encounters and the large numbers of mulatto children on some plantations were eloquent evidence that the traditional moral code was often broken in the South. In New Orleans and a few other major Southern cities, concubinage of very light-complexioned Negro women to wealthy plantation owners was openly tolerated and practiced.

Other abolitionists argued that slavery was fundamentally inconsistent with the national ideals of liberty and justice. Some urged that slavery should be abolished because it was an inefficient labor system. In the Midwest a large number of independent farmers objected to slavery because they feared that it would spread and drive them out of business, since they could not compete with slave labor.

Few among those who opposed slavery were free of some racial prejudice themselves, and some were very overt in their aversion to Blacks. Most abolitionist societies did not permit Blacks to join. William Lloyd Garrison was often criticized by other abolitionists because he associated socially with Blacks. Many Whites in the abolitionist cause assumed that Blacks were inferior humans who could be worked for but not associated with. Abraham Lincoln, who opposed the extension of slavery into free territories, stated publicly that he found the idea of Black people being socially equal to White people reprehensible.

Though they could not agree on how Black people should be treated, few on either side of the Mason-Dixon Line believed that Blacks were or could become the intellectual, social, and political equals of Whites. So pervasive was this thought that after the Civil War began, both sides refused to accept Black volunteers, reasoning that the war was essentially a White man's war. Eventually, military necessity drove the Union government to enlist Black soldiers, and Abraham Lincoln declared a general emancipation of all slaves in states that were in rebellion against the United States.

On May 22, 1863, a Bureau of Colored Troops was established to organize Black military units in the Union Army. By December 1863, 20,830 Black volunteers had enlisted in the Union Army. During 1864 even more Black soldiers were enlisted. Men such as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a White New England abolitionist who had supported John Brown's struggles to free slaves in Kansas, organized Black regiments from among former slaves. Though Black soldiers endured many hardships, including half the pay of White soldiers for a time, they proved to be effective fighters and fought in many of the key battles of the final two years of the war.

The end of the Civil War brought with it a new era of promise and challenge for America in the area of race relations. Formerly the relationships between Blacks and Whites were relatively simple. Blacks were most often in subservient positions; Whites were most often actual or potential masters. Now things were different. The Emancipation Proclamation had freed the Black masses, and in 1865 the Joint Committee on Reconstruction was established to lay out the guidelines for the establishment of the new social and political order that was to obtain. The committee sought to widen Reconstruction beyond President Andrew Johnson's narrow view and give Blacks significantly more civil and political protection. The Congress led the way in securing the rights and protection of Blacks in a swift series of constitutional amendments and congressional acts.

Between 1866 and 1870 the Constitution was amended to abolish slavery (Thirteenth Amendment), extend citizenship to Blacks (Fourteenth Amendment), and grant the right of suffrage (Fifteenth Amendment). In 1866 and 1875 Congress passed two civil rights acts; in 1865 and 1866 it established and continued the Freedman's Bureau, which sought to aid the freed slaves. Congress also enacted legislation to forbid Southern Whites from interfering with Reconstruction: the Force Act of 1870 and the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871. The immediate result of these political developments was the tremendous increase of Black voters and a significant number of Black elected officials in the South.

In 1870 there were 4.9 million Black people in the United States, 3.8 million of whom were still in the South. These people represented tremendous potential as a political force at the polls. Black leaders worked with the Republican Party to establish good relations with

White leaders and ensure that Black interests were looked after. The result of their work was tempered by the fact that few Blacks succeeded in making national political impact, although Southern states sent 17 Blacks, including two senators, to Congress before 1900.

It seems that Black participation was most significant on the state and local levels. It was on these levels that Blacks succeeded in significantly influencing the writing of constitutions, the establishment of public schools, and the abolition of lotteries and imprisonment for debt. In South Carolina the state legislature was for a time controlled by Blacks, and throughout the South hundreds of Blacks served as local officials.

For the masses of Black people in the South, the most immediate issues after the war were survival, work, family stability, and education. When the Civil War ended, thousands had been displaced by the conflict. Many plantations were deserted, and Blacks now had to find a way to make a living as free men in a free economy. Normally trained in only the basic agricultural skills, former field hands now had to do more than merely exist. What they really needed was land and assistance to develop as independent farmers. Most freedmen hoped that the government would redistribute abandoned land to them. The cry "Forty acres and a mule" was eloquent if quaint testimony to the freedman's understanding of his need for land as a basis of self-sufficiency. A few were able to obtain enough money to purchase land at public auctions, and the Freedman's Bureau supervised the distribution of some land to Black farmers, but the majority of Blacks were forced to work in the field much as they had during slavery, except that they were now paid wages or worked as dependent sharecroppers. As the *Arkansas State Gazette* said in an 1869 editorial, these "houseless, half-clad people" were an important element in the prosperity of the South but, like so many poor Whites, were unable to share in the wealth.

The freedmen's major asset was that they now had the freedom to move about at will to seek better employment, a course that White planters opposed. Immediately after the Civil War a number of "Black codes" were enacted in the South. Some of these laws made it difficult for Blacks to move freely from place to place. Although strong public opinion in the North caused the repeal of the Black codes, in 1867 there was still a desire on the part of some planters for

assurance that Black workers would be available in sufficient numbers. Within a few years that assurance was granted through the development of the crop lien system (sharecropping) and the convict lease system.

The sharecropping system grew out of two sets of desires. On the one hand, White planters wished to have a stable crop of workers who were tied to the land for at least one season. On the other hand, many Black freedmen desired work that would allow them to be independent and not constantly under the eye of an overseer. The sharecropping system seemed to be the perfect answer. Large sections of land were divided into smaller areas for each tenant farmer. The farmers were to work the land and share the profits of the crop with the landowner. Thus the tenant had a large amount of personal freedom but had to work very hard to make a living.

Undercapitalized and often required to provide their own seed, fertilizer, and agricultural equipment, most tenants were chronically in debt. Meanwhile, the owners enjoyed a sure work force, and the fluctuation of market prices was shared by both owner and tenant. Because of the steady decline in cotton prices during the last 30 years of the nineteenth century, few tenants were ever able to earn enough money to become landowners. Furthermore, by 1875 most states in the South had enacted peonage laws that made it illegal for indebted sharecroppers to leave the land. By then it was clear that most Black people in the South were to remain agricultural workers, with little hope of land ownership or financial security.

The convict lease system, developed during the turmoil immediately following the Civil War, also placed Blacks in a subordinate position. Sheriffs routinely leased convicts, mostly Blacks convicted of petty theft or vagrancy, to local planters. This relieved overcrowding in the jails and provided extra income for the sheriff's office. Large planters, as well as railroad, lumber, and mine operators, entered into profitable arrangements with local jails to obtain defenseless prisoners. Many were forced to work under brutal and dangerous conditions. It was reported in 1881 that in Arkansas the death rate among convict workers was 25 percent.

At the same time that society was placing these limits on the newly freed Blacks, a tremendous effort was under way to educate the freedmen. During the antebellum era, slaves had been denied access

to education; thus, educational opportunity was one of the most prized fruits of freedom. A number of church groups and concerned individuals sponsored "missionaries" from the North to go south and set up schools for Black children. Between 1866 and 1875 hundreds of such schools were established throughout the South. Some were multiple-staff schools with adequate supplies, but most were one-room, one-teacher schools with few supplies. Still, these modest schools contributed to the education of the freedmen. Some of the larger institutions, such as Howard (Washington, D.C.), Fisk (Nashville, Tennessee), Hampton (Hampton, Virginia), and Alcorn (Lorman, Mississippi), eventually became well-respected colleges.

The education of Black children following the Civil War was a problem in the North as well as in the South. Although most Northern states provided schools for Black children prior to the war, the quality of this education was uneven. Cities such as Indianapolis and New York were reluctant to move toward integrated education, while states such as Pennsylvania and Illinois had pockets in which segregation continued until well into the twentieth century.

In 1870 the Illinois legislature discussed a recommendation that allowed each local district to decide whether it wanted segregated or integrated schools as long as the decision did not require the additional outlay of funds to build schools only for Black children. In effect, the legislature supported segregated schools if the community had a large Black population, but not if a school had to be built to accommodate a small Black population. Such discussions were held in other places between 1865 and 1875, with lawmakers usually supporting either segregated schools or local autonomy in deciding the matter.

With the ending of Reconstruction in the South, there developed a concerted effort to strip Blacks of the political power they had gained. Beginning with Mississippi in 1890, every Southern state found a way to disfranchise Black voters legally. Three types of statutes proved especially effective in preventing Blacks from voting: the poll tax, literacy tests, and the grandfather clause.

The poll tax was a widely used form of voter discrimination and the easiest to implement. It involved a fee, usually \$1.50, that had to be paid for the privilege of voting. This was a real impediment for most Blacks, who were usually poor. The major problem with the tax

for Southerners was that it also discriminated against poor Whites. Some politicians avoided this problem by paying the tax for poor White voters if they agreed to vote for a particular candidate. In some cases, candidates also paid the tax for Black voters who agreed to vote for them. In order to head off this latter possibility, some states passed laws making it mandatory for the tax to be paid before the candidates were announced. Still, the poll tax proved so effective in neutralizing the Black vote that Tennessee, Florida, Arkansas, and Texas used the tax exclusively.

The literacy test was probably the most effective instrument for Black disfranchisement, and the most widespread. The mechanics of the test varied from place to place. In some places it was as simple as writing one's name and date of birth, although most districts required that a small section of the state constitution be read and interpreted. The successful completion of the test was determined by the person who administered the test. In many cases, Black professionals and college professors failed the test while White illiterates passed. Sometimes White persons and Black persons had virtually the same answers, but the Black persons failed the tests.

The most controversial of the efforts to control the Black vote was the "grandfather clause." The clause, usually a part of the revised state constitutions that were adopted during this period, stated that a person would be eligible to register and vote if his father or grandfather had been eligible to vote on January 1, 1860, or if he or an ancestor had served with either the United States or Confederate States military forces during the Civil War. Since most Blacks had been slaves in 1860, the clause eliminated almost all of the potential Black voters.

In 1915 the Supreme Court ruled the grandfather clauses unconstitutional, but by that time the Black electorate in the South had been almost completely decimated. In Louisiana there were 130,344 registered Black voters in 1896, but only 5,320 in 1900. In New Orleans there were 14,000 Black voters in 1896, but only 408 in 1908. In Alabama only 3,000 of the 181,471 previously registered Black voters were registered by 1900. In Virginia the ranks of Black voters shrank from 147,000 prior to 1902 to 21,000 after 1905.

In addition to disfranchising Blacks, Southern leaders established segregation. During the 1870s and 1880s the practice of segregation

appeared in such institutions as schools and hospitals, although trains and parks allowed some degree of integration. With racism increasing in the nation at large because of a new wave of immigration, Southern states in the 1890s were able to enforce and extend segregation through "Jim Crow" laws, which the Supreme Court judged constitutional in its 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. By the early twentieth century, segregation was fully established in both practice and law throughout the South.

The effort to take political power and social equality from Black citizens was often accompanied with violent words and deeds. Southern politicians running as White supremacists appealed openly to the racial divisions in Southern communities in an effort to become elected. Hoke Smith, editor of the *Atlanta Journal*, ran for governor of Georgia on a White supremacy platform that promised to disfranchise Blacks without disturbing the political power of White citizens. During his campaign he stirred up the crowds with allegations about Black atrocities. So great were the passions stirred by his speeches that following his election there was a lynching spree that lasted three days.

Such lynching was one of the most serious manifestations of the problems in race relations in America. The South had long had a tradition of dealing with social problems with a gun and a rope. Many parts of the South contained isolated communities with few facilities for the administration of impartial justice. Often accused felons were executed without a trial. The number of lynchings is not entirely clear, for it was not until the 1880s that data regarding lynchings were collected and published. Early reports indicated that more Whites than Blacks were being lynched. Between 1882 and 1888, for instance, 595 Whites were lynched as compared to 440 Blacks. By the 1890s the trend was completely reversed. The number of Black lynchings increased sharply between 1893 and 1904, averaging more than 100 annually as compared with a yearly average of 29 White lynchings. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier connected the increase in lynching with the drive for political domination and considered it a method used basically for political intimidation.

The mounting racial tensions, growing pessimism, and uncontrolled phobias of the 1880s and 1890s were hardly a favorable environment for the education of Black young people. Schools begun for

Blacks during the early years after the Civil War were struggling for survival in an atmosphere of diminished interest in the welfare and development of the Negro.

Into this situation stepped the young Black principal of Tuskegee Institute, a tiny school in south Alabama. A former slave and a graduate of Hampton Institute, Booker T. Washington was a great believer in the industrial education that he had received at Hampton. He advocated that the kind of education most useful to Blacks combined some academic education with the learning of a trade or handicraft. Convinced that such industrial education was the only way for Blacks to secure their proper place in the economic life of the nation, Washington urged them to concentrate on economic betterment rather than protesting their lack of civil rights. According to him, the best guarantee of civil rights was for the Black population to become indispensable to the economic life and health of the nation.

In 1895 Washington was invited to speak before a biracial audience gathered in Atlanta, Georgia, for the opening of the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition. This exposition was designed to demonstrate to the world the great strides that the South had made in the areas of industry, education, and agriculture since the war.

On this critical occasion Washington decided to be frank, and yet not say anything that would give undue offense to White Southerners. His speech, later referred to as "the Atlanta compromise," suggested that the salvation of both races lay in their ability to put their differences aside and pursue mutual economic goals. He told Whites that by lessening their antagonism toward Black people, they could use Blacks profitably in getting rich. He told Blacks that political and social equality are less important as present goals than economic viability. Washington urged his Black brothers to make themselves useful to the White community in every manly way, and cease protesting for equality.

"The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized. It is important and right that all privi-

leges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercises of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera house."

Washington concluded that in all things purely social Blacks and Whites could be as separate as the fingers of the hand, but in all things tending toward mutual economic benefit, united as the fist.

The speech proved sensational, and Washington was soon hailed as the wisest Black man in America. From 1885 until his death in 1915, he was considered by many as the foremost Black leader in America and certainly one of the most powerful men in America, regardless of race. This 30-year period is often referred to as the "age of Booker T. Washington." He came to have enormous influence upon politicians, philanthropists, and millions of common people, Black and White. Under his leadership, Tuskegee Institute became a world-famous school, and he, an equally famous educator.

Washington was not without his critics. William Monroe Trotter, editor of the *Boston Guardian*, and the first Black Phi Beta Kappa, sharply criticized Washington's compromise attitude on the subject of Black civil rights and his almost dictatorial control over philanthropic money that came into the Black community. W. E. B. DuBois, a leading Black scholar, publicly criticized Washington in an essay that appeared in *Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903. In a rhetorical denunciation of Washington's approach, DuBois asked:

"As a result of this tender of the palm branch, what has been the return? In these years there have occurred:

1. The disenfranchisement of the Negro.
2. The legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro.
3. The steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro.

These movements are not, to be sure, direct results of Mr. Washington's teaching; but his propaganda has, without a shadow of doubt, helped their speedier accomplishment."

Despite the controversy that surrounded him, and the attacks of his critics, Washington enjoyed the support of the White community of politicians and philanthropists, and his leadership was never seriously challenged. Nonetheless, his emphasis on industrial education

did little to improve the lot of the educated Black person in the South. By 1900 many educated Southern Blacks, frustrated by the lack of opportunity for them in the South, began to move to Northern cities.

Carter G. Woodson called this movement the "migration of the talented tenth." Although the transformation went largely unnoticed at the time, it was important in that these highly trained people, with their great sense of racial pride and solidarity, were instrumental in building Black political and economic structures in Northern cities, greatly encouraging and stimulating the "great migration" of Blacks from the rural South to the urban North, which began in 1916.

By the time of World War I, relations between Blacks and Whites were at an all-time low. Segregation and harsh discrimination was legal throughout the South, and in some places in the North as well. Unfavorable stereotypes about Black people had taken on the air of reality, as many people were ready to believe anything that seemed to support their particular prejudices. Black people, as well as Orientals and some European minorities, were excluded regularly from meaningful participation in the mainstream of American social, political, and economic life. In the South, where most of the Black population lived, inflation, loss of jobs, and disastrous cotton seasons between 1914 and 1916 made survival for many Black farmers a tenuous affair.

During this critical period a sharp increase in the need for labor in Northern factories, brought on by the decrease in European immigration because of the outbreak of World War I, provided a way of escape for many Southern farmers on the verge of starvation. Not only did the North provide the promise of jobs; it promised a freer life than Blacks could expect in the South. That there was a quiet kind of racism in the North was rather insignificant to many Black Southerners when they compared it to the great indignities and dangers to which they were exposed in the South. It was not certain to anyone whether they would find prosperity in the unfamiliar surroundings of the large Northern cities, yet the opportunity to escape from the harsh social and political oppression inspired thousands to leave the South and seek a new life for themselves in the city. Without the guidance of any real leaders, these Blacks swarmed into the Chicago

packinghouses, the steel mills of Pittsburgh and Gary, the docks of New York, and the auto plants of Detroit, as well as the factories and plants of scores of smaller cities.

This attempt to escape the harsh problems that most Blacks faced was destined to change the complexion of Northern cities, and eventually resulted in another different set of racial problems and tensions. But that was in the future. In 1916 the future seemed bright for thousands of Afro-Americans who boarded trains headed North for a try at a new life and their share of the "American dream."

Bibliographical Note

Ellen White's major comments on slavery appear within the context of her discussions of the Civil War in *Testimonies to the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 254, 258, 259, and 264-268. The same work (vol. 7, pp. 220-230 and vol. 9, pp. 217-226) discusses the needs of Blacks in the South. Further writings from the *Review and Herald*, personal letters, and miscellaneous statements on race relations and missionary work among Southern Blacks are collected in *The Southern Work*.

Swing Low Sweet Chariot

Swing low sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home,
Swing low sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home,

O, swing low sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home,
Swing low sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home.

I look'd over Jordan, an' what did I see,
Comin' for to carry me home,
A band of angels comin' after me,
Comin' for to carry me home.
If you get-a dere befo' I do,
Tell all of my friends I'm comin' too,

O, swing low sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home,
Swing low sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home,
Comin' for to carry me home.