NEGRO DISFRANCHISEMENT AND THE NEGRO IN BUSINESS: THE FOURTH ARTICLE I
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NEGRO DISFRANCHISEMENT AND THE NEGRO IN BUSINESS

BY BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

THE FOURTH ARTICLE IN THE STORY OF THE NEGRO

WHEN I began my work in Tuskegee in 1881, the colored people of Alabama had just been deprived—in a way that is now familiar—of many of their political rights. There was some voting, but few Negroes held office anywhere in Alabama at that time. The Negroes set great store by the political privileges that had been granted them during the Reconstruction period, and they thought that when they lost these they had lost all.

Soon after I went into Alabama a new President, James A. Garfield, was inaugurated at Washington. A little community of colored people not very far from Tuskegee were so impressed with the idea that the new Administration would do something to better their condition, especially in the way of strengthening their political rights, that, out of their poverty, they raised enough money to pay the expenses of one of their number to Washington, in order that he might get direct information and return and report to them what the outlook was. This incident struck me as the more pathetic because I happened to know the man who went on this errand. He was a good, honest, well-meaning fellow, but entirely lacking in knowledge of the world outside his own community. I doubt that he ever got near enough, even at the inauguration ceremonies, to see the President, and I am sure he never got inside the door of the White House. He returned to his people, at any rate, with a very gloomy report, and, although it was never quite clear whom he had seen or what he had done, the people understood what it meant.

The people did not say much about their loss. They preserved outwardly, as a rule, the same good nature and cheerfulness which had always characterized them, but deep down in their hearts they had begun to feel that there was no hope for them.

This feeling of apathy and despair continued for a long time among these people in the country districts. A good many of them who owned land in the county at this time gave it up or lost it for one reason or another. Others moved away from the county, and there were a great many abandoned farms. Gradually, however, the temper of the people changed. They began to see that harvests were just as good and just as bad as they had been before the changes

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which deprived them of their political privileges. They began to see, in short, that there was still hope for them in economic if not in political directions. The man who went to Washington to call on the President is still living. He is a different person now, a new man, in fact. Since that time he has purchased a farm; has built a decent, comfortable house; is educating his children; and I note that never a session of the monthly Farmers' Institute assembles at Tuskegee that this man does not come and bring some of the products from his farm to exhibit to his fellow-farmers. He is not only successful, but he is one of the happiest and most useful individuals in our county. He has learned that he can do for himself what the authorities at Washington could not do for him, and that is, make his life a success.

A large part of the work which Tuskegee Institute did in those early years, and has continued to do down to the present time, has been to show the masses of our people that in agriculture, in the industries, in commerce, and in the struggle toward economic success, there were compensations for the losses they had suffered in other directions. In doing this we did not seek to give the people the idea that political rights were not valuable or necessary, but rather to impress upon them that economic efficiency was the foundation for every kind of success.

I am pointing out these facts here in order to show how closely industrial education has been connected with the great economic advance among the masses of the Negro people during the last twenty-five years. If the effect of disfranchisement of the Negro was to discourage and in many instances to embitter him, industrial education has done much to turn his attention to opportunities that lay open to him in other directions than in politics. It has had the effect of turning attention to the vast quantities of idle lands in many parts of the South and the West, and in many instances has helped him take up these lands and make himself an independent farmer. It has turned attention to the opportunities in business and led him to perceive that in the South particularly there are opportunities for better service to his own race which he can perform more profitably than any one else.

The fact is that the colored people who went into politics directly after the war were in most cases what may be called the aristocracy of the race. Many of them had been practically, if not always legally, free, made so by their masters, who were at the same time their fathers, by whom they had been educated, and from whom they frequently inherited considerable property. They had formed their lives and characters on the models of the aristocratic Southern people, among whom they were raised, and they believed that politics was the only sort of activity that was fit for a gentleman to engage in. The conditions which existed directly after the war offered these men the opportunity to step in and make themselves the political leaders of the masses of the people.

In the meantime, however, between the close of the war and the period to which I have just referred, there had grown up a middle class among the colored people. This class was composed, for the most part, of men who had been slaves before the war. Some of them had been house servants, and had the advantage of intimate contact with their master's family; many of them had been slaves of that class of planters sometimes referred to in the South as the "yeomanry." Others had been field-hands on the big plantations. The majority had had very few opportunities before the war, except such as they had obtained in practicing the different trades which were carried on about the plantations. It is from this class that the greater portion of the Negro landowners has sprung; to this class that the greater number of mechanics formerly belonged; and it was from this class that the majority of the business men of the Negro race has arisen.

A farmer who became the owner of a large plantation of a thousand acres or more necessarily became something of a business man. Very likely he opened a store on his plantation in order to supply the tenants on his land. That was the case, for instance, with the Reid brothers, Frank and Dow, who live in Macon County, Alabama, about twelve miles from Tuskegee, at a little place called Dawkins. The father of these young men had for a long time leased and worked a large plantation of some 1,100

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acres. He was enabled to send his sons to school at Tuskegee, and after their return from school they leased 480 acres more, and subsequently added to that by purchase 605 acres, making a total of 2,185 acres of land under their control. A larger portion of this land they sublet to tenants, and as the necessities of the community they had formed manifested themselves, they established successfully a store, a cotton-gin, a blacksmith shop, and a grist-mill.

Frequently in the early days some young colored man who had worked in a restaurant or as a waiter in a hotel, after saving a little money, would start a business for himself in a small way. Gradually he would accumulate more capital and enlarge his business. That was the case of my friend John S. Trower, of Germantown, Philadelphia, who is now one of the leading caterers in the city of Philadelphia, and also with William E. Gross, proprietor of the Gross Catering Company, of 219 West 134th Street, New York. In Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, and Washington there are a number of noted Negro caterers who began life in the small way which I have described.

Among the earlier caterers of New York was Peter Van Dyke, who owned a place at 130 Wooster Street. He became wealthy, and left his children and grandchildren in good circumstances. Another of these early caterers was Boston Crummell, father of the late Alexander Crummell, one of the first Africans to be ordained as a priest by the Episcopal Church. Boston Crummell was born in West Africa and brought to America when he was a child. It is an interesting fact that his son, Alexander Crummell, after having studied in Queen's College, Cambridge, England, went to Africa as one of the first colored missionaries sent out from this country to Liberia.

Thomas Downing, who kept the once famous "Downing Oyster House," was one of the early Negro caterers of New York. His son, George T. Downing, built the Sea-Girt House, at Newport, Rhode Island, and was afterward a caterer in Washington, where he became a friend of Charles Sumner, Wendell Phillips, Henry Wilson, John Andrews, and others of the anti-slavery party of that time.

Charles H. Smiley, who was born at St. Catherine's, Canada, and was at one time one of the leading caterers of Chicago, began his life in Chicago as a janitor, but was employed during his spare time as a waiter at dinners and parties. Francis J. Moultry, who in 1909 is still conducting a large catering establishment at Yonkers, New York, got his training and accumulated his capital for his business career as a waiter in New York City. Mr. Moultry was at that time one of the large taxpayers of his city. He owned stock in several of the Yonkers banks, and is proprietor of what is, or was a few years ago, the largest apartment-house in Yonkers. Mr. Moultry owned valuable realty in various portions of the city, and has more than once been on the bond of county officers.

The training which many of the colored servants received, both before and after emancipation, gave them a certain capital in the way of experience with which to go into business on their own account. Perhaps the most successful colored hotel-keeper in the United States has been E. C. Berry, of Athens, Ohio. Hotel Berry, as I learned when I visited Ohio, has had an almost National reputation. Mr. Berry was one of the most respected citizens of the town in which he lives, and so successful has he been in conducting his hotel that it is regarded by the citizens as one of the institutions of the town.

Mr. Berry was born in Oberlin, Ohio, in 1854. When he was two years old, he was taken by his parents to the little town of Albany, which is about seven miles below Athens. At that time there were a number of lines of the Underground Railway which, starting at different points on the Ohio River, passed through Albany and Athens. At Albany there was early established what was known as the Enterprise Academy for colored children, and it was at this academy that Mr. Berry obtained his schooling. He first came to Athens when he was sixteen years old, and went to work in a brickyard at the small sum of fifty cents per day, which was soon increased to one dollar and twenty-five cents. With the money that he earned in this way he helped to support the members of his family who were still living in Albany. Eventually

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he secured employment in Athens in a restaurant, and it was the training he received there that enabled him later on to start a little place of his own.

Mr. Berry was successful in business from the first, and finally, after giving the matter due consideration and talking it over with friends in the city, he made up his mind to open a hotel. It was an entirely new thing at that time to see a colored man in the hotel business in that part of the country, and Mr. Berry knew that he was going to meet with opposition on account of his race. He determined to overcome this prejudice by making his hotel more comfortable than any other in the city, and by giving his guests more for their money than they were able to get anywhere else, not only in the city, but in the State. One thing I remember which impressed me as indicating the care and thoughtful attention which Mr. Berry gave to his guests was the fact that at night, after his guests had fallen asleep, he made it a practice to go to their rooms and gather up their clothes and take them to his wife, who would repair rents, add buttons where they were lacking, and press the garments, after which Mr. Berry would replace them. Mr. Berry's hotel, I may add, is said by Mr. Elbert Hubbard, the lecturer, who has had an opportunity to test the quality of a large number of hotels in different parts of this country, to be one of the best in the United States.

There are a number of other successful hotel men among the members of my race of whom I have made the acquaintance in different parts of the country. Joseph W. Lee, who, until he died a few years ago, kept the very popular and successful hotel at Squantum, a summer resort just outside of Boston, was one of these.

Negroes, both before the war and after, entered very easily into the barber business, and there is no business, I may add, in which the Negro has met more competition from foreign immigrants. In many cities, both North and South, the Negro barber's trade is almost wholly confined, at the present time, to members of his own race. It is interesting to observe, however, that this has in no way lessened the number of Negro barber shops, and the fact is an indication of the increasing economic welfare of the masses of the Negro people. In spite of the competition which I have mentioned, some of the largest and best-conducted barber shops in the United States are carried on by Negroes.

As an illustration, I might mention the shop of George A. Myers, of Cleveland, Ohio, whose place of business is fitted up not only with all conveniences that you will find in other first-class shops, but also with some that you will not find elsewhere. For instance, when I was last in his shop, he had devised an arrangement by which a customer could be connected at once by telephone with any one he wished to speak to, and that without leaving his chair. He has also provided a young woman stenographer, to whom patrons can dictate business letters, if they desire, without interrupting the work of the barber.

Another business in which the Negro early found an opportunity to be of service to his people is that of undertaking. As far as they were able, the Negro people have always tried to surround the great mystery of death with appropriate and impressive ceremonies. One of the principal features of the Negro secret organizations has been the care for the sick and the burial of the dead. The demand that these organizations sought to meet has created a business opportunity, and Negro business men have largely taken advantage of it.

One of the first men to perceive the opportunity for colored business men in this direction was Elijah Cook, a Negro undertaker of Montgomery, formerly a member of the State Legislature of Alabama. Mr. Cook was born a slave in Alabama. He was several times sold on the auction block during slavery, and at one of these sales he was separated from his brother, of whom he has never since heard. He was taught the carpenter's trade, however, and after he had served his apprenticeship was permitted to hire his time for twenty-five dollars a month. When the Civil War broke out, Mr. Cook still paid his master's wife the stipulated sum per month, and continued to do so faithfully until he was emancipated. He was a leader in founding the first colored school in Montgomery, which was held in

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a basement, under a dilapidated church. He himself was one of the first pupils, and, after working hard all day, was a faithful attendant of the night school.

Right after the war there was no colored undertaker in Montgomery, and frequently the corpses of the colored people were hauled to the cemetery in rough wagons. Mr. Cook, seeing this, bought a hearse and went into the undertaking business for himself. He accumulated a small fortune during the twenty years or more that he was in business, and became one of the respected citizens of Montgomery.

James C. Thomas, who, at the time I write, is said to be the richest man of African descent in New York, made a large part of his fortune in the undertaking business. Mr. Thomas came originally from Harrisburg, Texas, where he was born in 1864. In 1881, while he was employed by a steamer plying between New Orleans, Mexico, and Cuba, yellow fever broke out in New Orleans. The boat he was on came to New York to escape the quarantine. It was thus, quite by accident, that Mr. Thomas became a New Yorker.

There have been Negro undertakers in New York, I have been informed, for over a hundred and fifty years. There were several Negro undertakers in New York and Brooklyn at the time Mr. Thomas went into business, but the larger part of the trade which should have come to the colored undertakers went to white men. In 1909 Mr. Thomas had one of the largest businesses of any undertaker, white or black, in the city of New York. He was, in addition, the owner of a number of valuable properties in New York City, and owned stock in the Chelsea National Bank of New York.

I shall have occasion to make mention, in another connection, of the success the Negro has had as a banker, real estate dealer, and as a druggist, and in some other forms of business. As illustrating, however, the variety of enterprises into which the Negro has entered, I might mention the fact that one of the best-conducted grocery stores in the city of Montgomery is run by Victor H. Tulane, who started in business in 1893, in a little building twelve by twenty in size, with no experience, and a capital of $90. Mr. Tulane in 1909 was doing a business of $40,000 a year. He has been for a number of years one of the trustees of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute.

During my visit of observation and study in the State of Mississippi in the fall of 1908 I found that a large book-store, and, I was told, the only one at that time in the city of Greenville, Mississippi, was conducted by a colored man, Granville Carter. Mr. Carter told me that at one time there had been as many as five book-stores in the town, but he had succeeded, by close attention to business and offering his books at prices more favorable than his rivals, in outliving them all, until, at the time I was there, his was the only book-store in the town. He told me that he handled the entire book business of the county, and that he sold books in several of the adjoining counties. He regularly employs four helpers to assist him in the business, and at Christmas time he has been compelled to increase this number to ten.

In Jackson, Mississippi, H. K. Rischer had had for nearly twenty years, at the time of my visit, a practical monopoly of the bakery business. Mr. Rischer's bakery was one of the first concerns of its kind to be established in Jackson. His business, which amounts to about $30,000 a year, gives employment to twelve persons and was first established in 1881.

While it is true, as I have already pointed out, that the disposition of the Negro people to turn their attention more and more to practical matters and to business manifested itself at about the same time that I came to Alabama, and has grown with the increasing interest in industrial education, it is likewise true that only since 1897 or 1898 has there been any marked and rapid increase in the amount of business conducted by colored people. When the National Negro Business League met in Boston, in 1900, there were but two Negro banks in the United States; at the present time there are nearly, if not quite, fifty such institutions.

In order to illustrate the improvement of the general mass of the colored people in the South during the ten years since 1899, I shall take as an example the city

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of Jackson, Mississippi, where, in the summer of 1898, a special study was made of the economic condition of the people. Up to 1896, Negroes, who represented at that time more than half of the population, were not reckoned in the business life of the town. Few of them owned property of any kind. At the present time the Negro population is less than half of the total population of the town, and the 8,000 Negroes who make their homes there own, it is estimated, one-third of the area of the town, although this area represents but one-eleventh of the value of the city property. Negroes own, for instance, according to the tax records of the city, $581,580 worth of property.

A careful investigation brought to light the fact that about one-half the Negro families of that town own their own homes, while more than two-thirds of the houses in which the Negroes live are in the possession of their own race. Next to the possession of property, the amount of money deposited in banks by Negroes is an evidence of their economic condition. In speaking of this matter during the summer of 1908, the president of one of the prominent white banks said that Negroes had just begun to save their money during the last ten or twelve years. He was in a position to know, for Negroes had deposited in his bank more than $25,000. Altogether Negro savings in Jackson banks amounted, at the time, to something over $200,000, more than one-third of which was in the hands of the Negro banks.

Perhaps the most successful Negro business man in Jackson at that time was Dr. S. D. Redmond. Dr. Redmond received his medical training at the Illinois Medical College and the Harvard Medical College. When he settled in Jackson, ten years ago, he had practically nothing. At the time this is written he is President of the American Trust and Savings Bank, the oldest of the Negro banks in Jackson, and a stockholder in three banks controlled by the white people, as well as in the electric power and light company which lights the city streets. He owns two drug-stores, one of which is situated on the chief business street of the town. He receives rent from more than one hundred houses. There were in 1908 more than one hundred business enterprises conducted by Negroes in Jackson. Forty-five of these, including five contracting firms, did something like $380,000 worth of business during the years 1907 and 1908, and gave employment to two hundred and thirty persons.

It used to be said, before much was known about Africa, that the condition of the African people had remained the same in all parts of Africa through thousands of years, and nothing furnished so convincing a proof of the inability of the African to improve as the fact that during all this time he has not changed. I have already suggested in what I have written that an enormous change has taken place in the condition, in the feeling, and in the ambitions of the colored people in this country since they obtained their freedom a comparatively few years ago.

The Negro came out of slavery with a feeling that work was the symbol of degradation. In nearly all the schools conducted by Negroes in the South at the present time Negro children are learning to work. The Negro came out of slavery with almost no capital except the hard discipline and training he had received as a slave. In the years since that time he has not only become a large landowner and to a large extent the owner of his own home, but he has become a banker and a business man. He came out of slavery with the idea that somehow or other the Government, which freed him, was going to support and protect him, and that the great hope of his race was in politics and in the ballot. In the last decade the Negro has settled down to the task of building his own fortune and of gaining through thrift, through industry, and through business success that which he has been denied in other directions.

Many of the men to whom I have referred in this chapter, if I had time to relate their histories, would illustrate in their own lives the changes to which I refer. For instance, L. K. Attwood, the President of the Southern Bank, the second Negro bank in Jackson, Mississippi, was born a slave in Wilcox County, Alabama, about one hundred and fifty miles

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from Tuskegee, in 1851. He was sold on the block when he was eighteen months old. His mother bought him for $300 and moved with him to Ohio. In 1874 he graduated from Lincoln University, Pennsylvania. Two years later he was admitted to the bar in Mississippi. He served two terms as a member of the Mississippi Legislature from Hinds County, and has held the positions of United States Commissioner and United States Deputy Revenue Collector for the Louisiana and Mississippi districts. He is one of a group of professional colored men who have found that business pays better than politics.

While I am on this subject I should perhaps mention one other notable example of the business men who have found a larger opportunity in business than they did in politics. C. F. Johnson, of Mobile, Alabama, Secretary and General Manager of the Union Mutual Aid Association, was for many years Secretary of the Republican State Executive Committee of Alabama. He was for a time, also, Secretary to the Collector of Customs at the port of Mobile, but when Mr. Cleveland was elected President he gave up that position and took the position as elevator man instead. One day, after he had been there for some time, the new Collector, who had been appointed by Mr. Cleveland, noticed him there, and, thinking the time had come to complete his political house-cleaning, dismissed him from that position. Because the new man whom the Collector had to take his place did not do the work satisfactorily, he asked Mr. Johnson to return. Johnson said he would come back if he could have the appointment for four years, but the Collector would not agree to that, so Johnson went permanently out of office and into business. He was largely responsible for the organization of the company of which he has been general manager, and is now one of the wealthiest colored men in the State of Alabama.

So far as I have been able to learn, no colored man has ever been classed among the millionaires, though several men have had the reputation of being in that class. A few years ago there was a colored man by the name of Wiley Jones in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, who owned a street railway, a stable of trotting horses, and a private trotting park. When he died, it was learned for the first time that he had investments in real estate in a number of large Western cities, but his estate did not reach, as I remember, more than one hundred thousand dollars. John McKee, of Philadelphia, was reputed to be a millionaire, but his estate in Philadelphia, when he died, amounted to but $342,832. Colonel McKee gave directions in his will that the rents and incomes of his estate should accumulate until the death of all his children and grandchildren. The fund was to be used to establish a college for the education of fatherless boys, white and colored.

Perhaps the nearest approach to a colored millionaire was Thomy Lafon, of New Orleans, who died December 23, 1893, leaving an estate appraised at $413,000, the bulk of which was divided among the various charities of the city of New Orleans. I understand, however, that Mr. Lafon had disposed of a considerable portion of his estate before his death, in order to found various charities.

Mr. Lafon was born in New Orleans, December 28, 1810, of free Negro parents. He began life as a school-teacher; then he ran for a time a small dry-goods store on Orleans Street. As he accumulated a little money he began loaning it out at advantageous rates of interest, and went from that into land speculations, which made him very wealthy. Before he died he became much attached to the late Archbishop Janssens, and, under his direction, as I understand, began disposing of his fortune for philanthropic purposes. Before his death he had established an asylum for orphan boys called Lafon Asylum, and after his death he bequeathed to it the sum of $2,000 in cash and the revenue, amounting to $275 per month, of a large property at the corner of Royal and Iberville Streets.

Other legacies were in favor of the Lafon Old Folks' Home, previously established, the Charity Hospital of New Orleans, the several universities for colored children in New Orleans, and a number of charities in charge of the Catholic Church.

In this benevolent way the two largest fortunes which members of my race have yet accumulated were dispersed.

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