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The Atlanta University Publications, No. 17

**THE
NEGRO AMERICAN
ARTISAN**

**A Social Study made by Atlanta Uni-
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Negro Pupils Receiving Industrial Training, 1910-11 *

STATES	Male	Female	Total
Alabama	2,252	3,129	5,381
Arkansas	322	616	938
Delaware	156	60	216
District of Columbia	287	261	548
Florida	427	608	1,035
Georgia	1,327	2,531	3,858
Indiana	35	20	55
Kentucky	223	316	539
Louisiana	1,386	1,948	3,334
Maryland	132	210	342
Mississippi	1,245	1,222	2,467
Missouri	210	268	478
New Jersey	53	89	142
North Carolina	1,560	2,457	4,017
Ohio	57	144	201
Oklahoma	42	18	60
South Carolina	1,314	1,933	3,247
Tennessee	851	1,223	2,074
Texas	730	1,637	2,367
Virginia	1,524	2,137	3,661
West Virginia	233	209	442
Total	14,366	21,036	35,402

* U. S. Commissioner of Education, Report of 1911.

It would seem fair to conclude that from half to two-thirds of the Negroes trained in industrial schools do not follow their trades. This may be on account of other offers made to them, such as teaching in rural schools. However, considering the poor pay in such competing occupations and the rising wages of and growing demand for skilled artisans, one cannot help reaching the conclusion that the Negro industrial schools are not yet meeting the demands of modern industry.

Section 34. The Economic Future of the Negro American

What are the questions in the present problem of the economic status of the Negro American? They may be summed up in four groups:

1. The relation of the Negro to city and country.
2. The relation of the Negro to group and national economy.
3. The influence of race prejudice.
4. The question of efficiency.

City and Country

A fact of great importance in regard to the economic conditions of the Negro American is his cityward movement. According to the Thirteenth Census 2,689,229 or 27.3 per

cent of the Negroes in the United States lived in urban centers in 1910, a decided increase over 1900. The cityward movement of the Negro is explained by:¹

1. The divorce of the Negro from the soil.
2. The trend of the Negro to industrial and commercial centers.
3. Secondary or individual causes:
 - (a) Attractiveness of urban centers.
 - (b) Labor legislation.
 - (c) Desire for economic improvement.
 - (d) Family relationships.
 - (e) Desire to escape from restrictive and oppressive legislation and social customs.

This means an intensifying of the urban economic problem. This group of 2,689,229 town Negroes presents pre-eminently all of the economic problems outside of those connected with land holding and agriculture.

Moreover, the city Negroes include more than a third of the intelligent Negroes of the United States and have a rate of illiteracy of probably less than 25 per cent. Unquestionably it is in the city that the more intricate problems of economic life and race contact are going to be fought out. On the other hand, the very presence of seven million Negroes in the country districts makes the economic problem there, tho simple in quality, of tremendous proportions in quantity and of added significance when we see how the country is feeding the city problems.

Group Economy and National Economy

Present conditions show that while the force of competition from without is of tremendous economic importance in the economic development of the Negro American it is by no means final. In an isolated country the industry of the inhabitants can be supported and developed by means of a protecting tariff until the country is able to enter into international trade with fully developed resources; that a similar thing can be accomplished in a group not wholly isolated but living scattered among more numerous and richer neighbors is often forgotten. There is therefore a double question in

¹ See Haynes, G. E. *The Negro at Work in New York City*, pp. 13-44.

regard to the Negro's economic advance. The first question is: How far is the Negro likely to gain a foothold as one of the economic factors in the nation's industrial organization? The second is: How far can the Negro develop a group economy which will so break the force of race prejudice that his right and ability to enter the national economy are assured?

Race Prejudice

Race prejudice, more than any other single factor, retards the Negroes' development in the economic world. Outside of all question of ability an American of Negro descent will find more or less concerted effort on the part of his white neighbors:

- (1) To keep him from all positions of authority.
- (2) To prevent his promotion to higher grades.
- (3) To exclude him entirely from certain lines of industry.
- (4) To prevent him from competing upon equal terms with white workingmen.
- (5) To prevent his buying land.
- (6) To prevent his defence of his economic rights and status by the ballot.

Efforts in these directions have been prest with varying degrees of emphasis and have had varying degrees of success. Yet they must all be taken into account in any economic study of the Negro American. Strikes have repeatedly occurred against Negro firemen, of whose ability there was no complaint. The white office boy, errand boy, section hand, locomotive fireman all have before them the chance to become clerk or manager or to rise in railway service. The Negro has few such openings. Fully half of the trade unions in the United States, counted by numerical strength, exclude Negroes from membership and thus usually prevent them from working at the trade. Another fourth of the unions while admitting a few black men here and there practically exclude most of them. In only a few unions, mostly unskilled, is the Negro welcomed, as in the case of the miners. In a few others the economic foothold of the Negro has been good enough to prevent his expulsion, as in some of the

building trades. Agitation to prevent the selling of land to Negroes has for a long time been evident over large districts of the South and is still spreading. In an Atlanta campaign in the not far distant past the most telling cartoon for the influence of white voters was one which represented the house of a particular candidate in process of erection by black men. The black vote was of course disfranchised in this contest, as it is in a large part of the South.

Negro Efficiency

The last element in the economic condition of the Negro is the great question of efficiency. How efficient a laborer is the Negro and how efficient can he become with intelligent technical training and encouragement? That the average Negro laborer today is less efficient than the average European laborer is certain. When, however, you take into account the Negro's past industrial training, his present ignorance, and the social atmosphere in which he works it is not exactly fair to condemn him nor is it easy to say offhand what is his possible worth. Certainly increasing intelligence has made him increasingly discontented with his conditions of work; the determined withdrawing of responsibility from the Negro has not increased his sense of responsibility; the systematic exploitation of black labor has decreased its steadiness and reliability. Notwithstanding all this there never were before in the world's history so many black men steadily engaged in common and skilled labor as in the case of the American Negro. Nor is there today a laboring force which seems capable, under judicious guidance, of more remarkable development.

Economic Groups

The Negroes of America may be divided into three distinct economic groups:

- (1) The independents—farmers, teachers, clergymen, merchants and professional men and women.
- (2) The struggling—artisans, industrial helpers, servants and farm tenants.
- (3) The common laborers.

The Independents

The independents number possibly 300,000 Negroes and include 225,000 farmers, 25,000 teachers, 17,000 clergymen, 15,000 merchants and numbers of professional men and women of various sorts. They are separated sharply into a rural group of farmers and an urban group and are characterized by the fact that with few exceptions they live by an economic service done their own people. This is least true in regard to the farmers but even in their case it is approximately true, for they, to an increasingly large degree, raise their own supplies and use their produce as a surplus crop. Usually thru this alone do they come into national economy. This group is the one that feels the force of outward competition and prejudice least in its economic life and most in its spiritual life. It is the head and front of the group economy movement, comprehends the spiritual as well as the economic leaders and is bound in the future to have a large and important development, limited only by the ability of the race to support it. However, in some respects this group is truly vulnerable. Many of the teachers, for instance, depend upon educational boards elected by white voters and many depend upon philanthropy. There has been concerted action in some of the rural districts of the South to drive out the best Negro teachers and even in the cities the way of the independent black teacher who dares think his own thots is made difficult. In many cases Negro teachers under the great philanthropic foundations are being continually warned that their bread and butter depend on their agreeing with present public opinion in regard to the Negro. There is growing up however, silently, almost unnoticed, a distinct Negro private school system officered, taught, attended and supported by Negroes. Such private schools have today at least 30,000 pupils and are growing rapidly—another example of group economy as produced by the Negro American.

If we regard exclusively the urban group of these independents we find that the best class of this group is fully abreast in education and morality with the great middle class

of Americans. They have furnished notable names in literature, business and professional life and have repeatedly in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington and other great urban centers proved their right to be treated as American citizens on a plane of perfect equality with other citizens. Despite this fact and despite the fact, too, that this group is numerically small and without much inherited wealth, it has been struggling under two overwhelming burdens: First, upon this group has been laid the duty and responsibility of the care, guidance and reformation of the great stream of black rural immigrants from the South simply because they happen to be of the same race. There is no claim or vestige of a claim that this small city group of risen Negroes is responsible for the degradation of the plantation, yet upon this small group the great work is placed. In the case of other immigrants to our urban centers, each race must care for its own and be responsible for its advancement, but the helpers are given all aid and sympathy in their undertakings and their hands are upheld. In the case of the Negro however, every disability, every legal, social and economic barrier placed before the new immigrant must be endured by the city group on whom the immigrants have been dumped. And that group must be judged continually by the worst class of those very immigrants whose uplift is calmly shifted by the city at large.

What is the result? The talented tenth is submerged under the wave of immigration. And this is the second burden under which the group has labored. This has been the experience in many cities of the North. In the South, however, the beating back of the leading group has not awaited the excuse of immigration. On the general ground of impudence or indolence members of this class of economic and social leaders have been repeatedly driven out of the smaller towns, while in the larger cities every possible combination and tool from the Jim Crow laws to the secret society and the boycott has been made time and time again to curtail the economic advantages of the members of this class and to

make their daily life so intolerable that they would either leave or sink to listless acquiescence.

What then, in view of these conditions, can this town group do in self defence? It can organize the Negroes about it into a self supplying group. This organization is actually going on. So far has it gone that in cities like Washington, Richmond and Atlanta a Negro family which does not employ a Negro physician is in danger of social ostracism; in the North this is extending to grocery stores and similar businesses. Whereas only a few years ago Negroes transacted insurance business with white companies, today more than half of that business has passed to black companies.

There are persons who see nothing but the advantages of this course. But it has grave disadvantages, too. It intensifies prejudice and bitterness. For example: White insurance agents and collectors in the South, for fear of white opinion, would not take off their hats when they entered Negro homes. The black companies have harpt on this, publisht it, called attention to it and actually capitalized it into cold cash. Again, this movement narrows the activity of the best class of Negroes, withdraws them from much helpful competition and contact, perverts and cheapens their ideals—in fact provincializes them in thot and deed. Yet it is today the only path of economic escape for the most gifted class of black men and the development along this line is certain to be enormous.

Turning to the rural group of this independent class the Negro land owners are to be considered. Here first one runs against one of those traditional statements which pass for truth because unchallenged, namely, that it is easy for the southern Negro to buy land. The letter of this statement is true but the spirit of it is false. There are vast tracts of land in the South that anybody, black or white, can buy for little or nothing for the simple reason that such tracts are worth little or nothing. Eventually these lands will become valuable. But they are almost valueless today. For the Negro, land to be of any value must have present value for he is too poor to wait. Moreover it must be

1. Land which he knows how to cultivate.
2. Land accessible to a market.
3. Land so situated as to afford the owner protection.

There are certain crops which the Negro farmer knows how to cultivate; to these can be added certain food supplies. Gradually intensive cultivation can be taught but this takes a long time. It is idle to compare the South with Belgium or France for the agricultural economy of those lands is the result of centuries of training aided by a rising market and by law and order, while the present agricultural economy of the South is but a generation removed from the land murder of a slave regime. No graduate of that school knows how to make the desert blossom as the rose and the process of teaching must be long and tedious. Meantime he must live on such crops as he knows how to cultivate. In addition to the poverty of the soil, bad roads, comparatively few railroads and few navigable rivers throw much of this land out of usefulness. But even more important than all this: the Negro farmer must seek the protection of community life with his own people and this he finds in the black belt. It is precisely in this black belt, however, that it is most difficult for him to buy land. For there it is that the capitalistic culture of cotton with a system of labor peonage is so profitable that land is high. In addition, in many of these regions it is considered bad policy to sell land to Negroes because a fever of land owning "demoralizes" the labor system; so that in the densest black belt of the South the percentage of land holding among Negroes is alarmingly low, a fact that has led to curious moralizing on the shiftlessness of black men.

The increase of the average size of farms in many parts of the South is illustrative of the astounding and dangerous concentration of land holding in that section which is itself more appalling when it is noted that many of these farms do not belong singly to single owners but are owned in groups of as high as forty or fifty by great landed proprietors. Many of these landed proprietors refuse to sell a single acre of land to black men. While there are of course large regions where black men can buy land on reasonable terms, it is

usually land poorly situated as regards markets, or unhealthy in climate, or so placed as to afford the owners poor schools and lawless, overbearing white neighbors.

Add to these facts the results of the training and the character of the Negro farmers. Black farmers are often discust and criticised as tho they were responsible, trained men who carelessly and viciously neglect their economic opportunity. On the contrary they are for the most part unlettered men, consciously and carefully trained to irresponsibility, to whom all concepts of modern property and saving are new and who need benevolent guardianship in their upward striving. Such guardianship they have in some cases received from former masters and in this way a considerable number of the present land owners first got their land. In the great majority of cases however, this guardianship has consisted in deliberately taking the earnings of the Negro farmer and appropriating them to the use of the landlord. The argument was this: "These Negroes do not need this money. If I give it to them they'll squander it or leave the plantation; therefore I will give them just enough to be happy and keep them with me. In any case their labor rightfully belongs to me and my fathers and was illegally taken from us." On the strength of this argument and by such practices it is a conservative estimate to say that three-fourths of the stipulated wages and shares of crops which the Negro has earned on the farm since emancipation has been illegally withheld from him by the white landlords, either on the plea that this was for his own good or without any plea at all.

Would this wealth have been wasted if given the laborer? Waiving the mere question of the right of any employer to withhold wages, take the purely economic question: Is the community richer by such practices? It is not. The South is poorer. The best Negroes would have squandered much at first and most would have squandered all, but this would have been more than offset by the increased responsibility and efficiency of the resulting Negro landholders. Nor is

this mere pious opinion. There is in the South in the middle of the black belt, a county of some 700 square miles, Lowndes County, Alabama. It contained in 1910 28,125 Negroes and 3,769 whites. It was formerly the seat of the most strenuous type of American slavery—with absentee owners, living at ease in Montgomery, great stretches of plantations with 500 to 1000 slaves on each driven by overseers and riders. There was no communication with the outside world, little passing between plantations. The Negroes were slothful and ignorant—even today, fifty years after emancipation, the illiteracy among those over ten is about 51 per cent. It would be difficult to find a place where conditions were on the whole more unfavorable to the rise of the Negro. The white element was lawless, the Negroes thoroly cowed, and up until recent times the body of a dead Negro did not even call for an arrest. In this county during the last twenty years there has been carried on a scheme of co-operative land buying under the Calhoun School. It was asked for by a few Negroes who could not get land; it was engineered by a Negro graduate of Hampton; it was made possible by the willingness of a white landlord to sell his plantation and actively further the enterprise by advice and good will. It was capitalized by white northerners and inspired by a New England woman. Here was every element in partnership and the experiment began in 1892. It encountered all sorts of difficulties: the character and training of the men involved; the enmity of the surrounding white population with a few notable exceptions; the natural suspicion of the black population born of a regime of cheating; the low price of cotton; several years of alternate flood and drouth; and the attempts of the neighboring whites to secure the homesteads thru mortgages.

The twentieth annual report of the Principal of the Calhoun Colored School of Calhoun, Lowndes County, Alabama, says:

While in 1892 the majority of the people lived in rented one-room cabins, now by far the larger number are in cottages of from two to four

rooms and in some cases as many as six to eight rooms. Many of these cottages were put up and are owned by the Negro occupants on land they have bot thru the school.

The improvements have come slowly and by daily almost imperceptible growth, but just as truly have they come to stay and to increase.

All the land the school had for sale near its own locality has been bot by the Negroes. Several men have this year finisht their payments on land and on houses, and have paid in full the mortgages they were under. Only a few men have still a debt remaining before they can really say, "These are our own homes." In several instances a man has sold a few acres of his land to lessen the debt upon the whole, and this is a double help. It reduces his financial burden and forces him into more intensive farming.

Not only from an economic point of view but from the standpoint of the sociologist as well the experiment here in Lowndes County has been both interesting and successful. The Negroes call it the "Free Land." There are no overseers and riders roaming about whipping the workers and seducing black wives and daughters; there is an eight months' school in their midst, a pretty new church, monthly conferences, a peculiar system of self government, and a family life of high moral tone.

What has been done in Lowndes County under the Calhoun School and the sensible guardianship of its wise leaders could be duplicated in every single black belt county in the South. It is to be hoped that such will be done and on that hope is based one's faith in the economic future of this black rural group.

The Struggling

The second great economic group among the Negroes of America may be called "the struggling." It includes the artisans, the industrial helpers, the servants and the farm tenants. This group is characterized as follows:

1. It is sharply divided into a city and a country group.
2. While it has a large significance in the group economy of the Negro American, its overwhelming significance is for the industry of the nation as a whole.
3. Its great hindrance is the necessity of group substitution in the place of individual promotion.
4. Its greatest enemy is the organized opposition of its white fellow workmen.

The rural group of this class of Negro Americans consists of farm tenants. In a large number of cases farm tenancy has been an aid to land buying; in many cases farm tenancy has been a school of thrift and saving; in the majority of cases it was the only available system after the war when the Negroes were set free without landed possessions of their own. Yet, when all this is said, it remains true that the system of farm tenancy as practiced over the larger part of the South today is a direct encouragement to cheating and peonage, a means of debauching labor, and a feeder of crime and vagrancy. It demands for its support a system of mortgage and contract laws and a method of administration which are a disgrace to twentieth century civilization. For every man whom the system has helped into independence it has pushed ten back into virtual slavery. It is often claimed that honest and benevolent employers and landholders have made this system a means of uplift, development and growth. In thousands of cases this is perfectly true; but at the same time it remains true and terribly true that any system of free labor where the returns of the laborer, the settlement of all disputes, the drawing of the contract, the determination of the rent, the expenditure of the employees or tenants, the price they pay for living, the character of the houses they live in, and their movements during and after their work are left practically to the unquestionable power of one man who owns the land and profits by the labor and who is in the exercise of his power practically unrestrained by public opinion or the courts and who has no fear of ballots in the hands of the laborers or their friends—any such system is inherently wrong. If men complain of its results being shiftlessness, listlessness and crime, they have themselves to thank. To the man who declares that he is acting justly and treating his tenants and employees even better than they treat themselves, it is sufficient answer to say that he is an exception to the rule; that the majority of the landholders are as indifferent to the welfare of their men as are employers the world over; and that a deplorably large minority consciously oppress and cheat

them. The best employer or landholder suffers therefore for the sins of the average.

The only salvation for these Negro tenants lies in landholding, and in this the Negroes have made commendable strides. In 1890 Negro Americans owned 120,738 farms; in 1900 they owned 187,799 farms; in 1910 they owned about 220,000 farms, an increase of over 82 per cent. If the Negroes thruout the whole of the rural South had been encouraged by such wise economic leadership as was the case in Lowndes County, Alabama, referred to above, the record would be even more encouraging.

The city group of this class of Negro workers consists of perhaps 130,000 skilled artisans, 600,000 semi-skilled and ordinary industrial helpers, and 500,000 servants. The servant class has lost most of its best representatives because it offers a narrower and narrower method of uplift. This is due in part to foreign competition and in part to the fact that the temptations to Negro girls in domestic service are greater than in any single industry. It must be remembered that the mulatto is the product of house service in the South.

With the skilled and semi-skilled Negroes the industrial history has been this: Groups of Negroes have been excluded entirely from certain trades and admitted to others. Unfortunately they have been able to hold their place in the second set by working for lower wages, tho in certain industries they have forced themselves without resorting to the lever of low wages. This gave the trade unions a chance to fight Negroes as scabs. In some battles the unions won and so continued to exclude Negroes. In other cases the Negroes won and were admitted to the unions. Even in the union, however, they have been and are today discriminated against in many cases. In the near future the members of this class of Negro workingmen are going to have the struggle of their lives and the outlook indicates that by the fulcrum of low wages and the group economy, coupled with increasing efficiency, they will win. This means that the Negro is to be admitted to the national economy only by degrading labor conditions.

The alternative offered is shameful and could be easily avoided if color prejudice did not insist upon group substitution for Negroes in industry. That is, under present conditions a single individual or a few men of Negro descent cannot usually gain admittance to an industry. Only when they can produce workmen enough to supply the whole industry or the particular enterprise can the black man be admitted. Then immediately this substitution is made the occasion of a change in labor conditions—lower wages, longer hours and worse treatment. It thus often happens that by refusing to work beside a single black man, the workmen in an industry suffer a general lowering of wages and working conditions. The real economic question in the South is: How long will race prejudice supply a more powerful motive to white workingmen of the South than decent wages and industrial conditions? Today the powerful threat of Negro labor is making child labor and the fourteen-hour day possible in southern factories. How long will it be before the white workingmen of the South discover that the interests that bind them to their black brothers are greater than those that artificially separate them? The answer is easy: That discovery will not be made until the present wave of extraordinary prosperity and exploitation passes and the ordinary every day level of economic struggle begins. If the Negro can hold his own until then his development is certain.

The Common Laborers

The third distinct economic group of American Negroes is the group of common laborers numbering more than two millions. A million and a quarter are farm laborers and the remainder are common laborers of other sorts. This group includes half the breadwinners of the race and its condition is precarious. In many of the country districts of the South the laws concerning contracts, wages and vagrancy are continually forcing the lower half of these laborers into pauperism and crime. In most of the southern states the law concerning the breaking of a contract to work made between an ignorant farm hand and a land owner and covering a year's

time is enforced to the letter and the breaking of such a contract by the laborer is a penitentiary offense. A large proportion of the homicides in the country districts of the South in which Negroes are the slayers or the victims arise from disputes over wage settlement. So intolerable has the condition of the farm laborer of the South become, that he is running away from the country and entering the cities, there to add to the already complex problems of city life. One frequently hears the demand for immigrants to fill the places of these fleeing Negro farm hands. Notwithstanding all efforts in this direction it is safe to say that no group of immigrants will stand the present contract and crop lien system. Certain it is that they will not stand the lawlessness of the average country district of the South where every white man is a law unto himself and where no Negro has any rights which the worst white man is bound to respect. So bad has this lawlessness become in some parts of the South that concerted and commendable action has been taken against white cappers and night riders and a few peonage cases have reached the courts. These efforts, however, have but scratched the surface of the real trouble—a trouble which lies deep-seated in the social fabric of the South, a trouble which so seriously retards the whole South in its economic advancement and development.

On the whole there are four general cures for the economic submersion of this class of Negro Americans. First, the classes above must be given every facility to rise so as not to bear down upon them from above. Secondly, the system of law and law courts in the South by which it is practically impossible in the country districts and improbable even in the cities for a black laborer to force justice from a white employer must be changed. Thirdly, Negro children must be given common school training. The states are not doing their duty in this respect and the tendency in some of them is to do less.¹

¹ See Atlanta University Publication, No. 16, The Common School and the Negro American.

Finally, the black laborer must have a vote. It is impossible for these two million and more black workingmen to maintain themselves when thrust into modern competitive industry so long as the state allows them no voice or influence in the making of the laws or the interpretation and administration of the same.

The value of land and buildings owned by Negroes in the South in 1910 was \$272,992,238, an increase of nearly 90 per cent in a single decade. This does not include land owned by Negro farmers and rented out. On a basis of the value of farm property the total Negro wealth today may be estimated at \$570,000,000. Yet in much of the South the holders of this wealth are as absolutely disfranchised as the worst criminal in the penitentiary. They cannot say a word as to the condition of the roads and highways which pass their property, or as to the location or supervision of their schools or the choice of teachers, or as to the selection of the government officials or the fixing of the rate of taxation.

Summary

Half the Negro breadwinners of the nation are partially submerged by a bad economic system, an unjust administration of the laws, and enforced ignorance. Their future depends on common schools, justice, and the right to vote. A million and three-quarters of men just above these are fighting a fierce battle for admission to the industrial ranks of the nation—for the right to work. They are handicapped by their own industrial history which has made them often shiftless and untrustworthy; but they can, by means of wise economic leadership, be made a strong body of artisans and land owners. Three hundred thousand men stand economically at the head of the Negroes, and by a peculiar self-protecting group economy are making themselves independent of prejudice and competition.

What can be said of any one of these groups of black working men can be said of them all. *In so far as they are given opportunity and assured justice, in so far can the world expect from them the maximum of efficiency and service.*

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