Black Reconstruction in America

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BLACK RECONSTRUCTION

AN ESSAY TOWARD A HISTORY OF THE PART
WHICH BLACK FOLK PLAYED IN THE ATTEMPT
TO RECONSTRUCT DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA,
1860-1880

BY

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Here was no bid for the coöperation of either slaves or free Negroes. In the North, Negroes were not allowed to enlist and often refused with indignation. "Thus the weakness of the South temporarily became her strength. Her servile population, repulsed by Northern pro-slavery sentiment, remained at home engaged in agriculture, thus releasing her entire white population for active service in the field; while, on the other hand, the military resources of the North were necessarily diminished by the demands of labor."[4]

It was as Frederick Douglass said in Boston in 1865, that the Civil War was begun "in the interests of slavery on both sides. The South was fighting to take slavery out of the Union, and the North fighting to keep it in the Union; the South fighting to get it beyond the limits of the United States Constitution, and the North fighting for the old guarantees;—both despising the Negro, both insulting the Negro."

It was, therefore, at first by no means clear to most of the four million Negroes in slavery what this war might mean to them. They crouched consciously and moved silently, listening, hoping and hesitating. The watchfulness of the South was redoubled. They spread propaganda: the Yankees were not only not thinking of setting them free, but if they did anything, they would sell them into worse slavery in the West Indies. They would drive them from even the scant comfort of the plantations into the highways and purlieus. Moreover, if they tried to emancipate the slaves, they would fail because they could not do this without conquest of the South. The South was unconquerable.

The South was not slow to spread propaganda and point to the wretched condition of fugitive Negroes in order to keep the loyalty of its indispensable labor force. The Charleston *Daily Courier* said February 18, 1863: "A company of volunteers having left Fayette County for the field of action, Mr. Nance sent two Negro boys along to aid the company. Their imaginations became dazzled with the visions of Elysian fields in Yankeedom and they went to find them. But Paradise was nowhere there, and they again sighed for home. The Yanks, however, detained them and cut off their ears close to their heads. These Negroes finally made their escape and are now at home with Mr. Nance in Pickens. They are violent haters of Yankees and their adventures and experiences are a terror to Negroes of the region, who learned a lesson from their brethren whose ears are left in Lincolndom!"

The Charleston *Mercury*, May 8, 1862, said: "The Yankees are fortifying Fernandina (Florida) and have a large number of Negroes engaged on their works. Whenever the Negroes have an opportunity,

they escape from their oppressors. They report that they are worked hard, get little rest and food and no pay."

The Savannah *Daily News* reports in 1862 that many stolen Negroes had been recaptured: "The Yankees had married a number of the women and were taking them home with them. I have seen some who refused to go and others who had been forced off at other times who had returned."

It was a lovely dress parade of Alphonse and Gaston until the Negro spoiled it and in a perfectly logical way. So long as the Union stood still and talked, the Negro kept quiet and worked. The moment the Union army moved into slave territory, the Negro joined it. Despite all argument and calculation and in the face of refusals and commands, wherever the Union armies marched, appeared the fugitive slaves. It made no difference what the obstacles were, or the attitudes of the commanders. It was "like thrusting a walking stick into an ant-hill," says one writer. And yet the army chiefs at first tried to regard it as an exceptional and temporary matter, a thing which they could control, when as a matter of fact it was the meat and kernel of the war.

Thus as the war went on and the invading armies came on, the way suddenly cleared for the onlooking Negro, for his spokesmen in the North, and for his silent listeners in the South. Each step, thereafter, came with curious, logical and inevitable fate. First there were the fugitive slaves. Slaves had always been running away to the North, and when the North grew hostile, on to Canada. It was the safety valve that kept down the chance of insurrection in the South to the lowest point. Suddenly, now, the chance to run away not only increased, but after preliminary repulse and hesitation, there was actual encouragement.

Not that the government planned or foresaw this eventuality; on the contrary, having repeatedly declared the object of the war as the preservation of the Union and that it did not propose to fight for slaves or touch slavery, it faced a stampede of fugitive slaves.

Every step the Northern armies took then meant fugitive slaves. They crossed the Potomac, and the slaves of northern Virginia began to pour into the army and into Washington. They captured Fortress Monroe, and slaves from Virginia and even North Carolina poured into the army. They captured Port Royal, and the masters ran away, leaving droves of black fugitives in the hands of the Northern army. They moved down the Mississippi Valley, and if the slaves did not rush to the army, the army marched to the slaves. They captured New Orleans, and captured a great black city and a state full of slaves.

What was to be done? They tried to send the slaves back, and even

used the soldiers for recapturing them. This was all well enough as long as the war was a dress parade. But when it became real war, and slaves were captured or received, they could be used as much-needed laborers and servants by the Northern army.

This but emphasized and made clearer a truth which ought to have been recognized from the very beginning: The Southern worker, black and white, held the key to the war; and of the two groups, the black worker raising food and raw materials held an even more strategic place than the white. This was so clear a fact that both sides should have known it. Fremont in Missouri took the logical action of freeing slaves of the enemy round about him by proclamation, and President Lincoln just as promptly repudiated what he had done. Even before that, General Butler in Virginia, commander of the Union forces at Fortress Monroe, met three slaves walking into his camp from the Confederate fortifications where they had been at work. Butler immediately declared these men "contraband of war" and put them to work in his own camp. More slaves followed, accompanied by their wives and children. The situation here was not quite so logical. Nevertheless, Butler kept the fugitives and freed them and let them do what work they could; and his action was approved by the Secretary of War.

"On May twenty-sixth, only two days after the one slave appeared before Butler, eight Negroes appeared; on the next day, forty-seven, of all ages and both sexes. Each day they continued to come by twenties, thirties and forties until by July 30th the number had reached nine hundred. In a very short while the number ran up into the thousands. The renowned Fortress took the name of the 'freedom fort' to which the blacks came by means of a 'mysterious spiritual telegraph.'"[8]

In December, 1861, the Secretary of the Treasury, Simon Cameron, had written, printed and put into the mails his first report as Secretary of War without consultation with the President. Possibly he knew that his recommendations would not be approved, but "he recommended the general arming of Negroes, declaring that the Federals had as clear a right to employ slaves taken from the enemy as to use captured gunpowder." This report was recalled by the President by telegraph and the statements of the Secretary were modified. The incident aroused some unpleasantness in the cabinet.

The published report finally said:

"Persons held by rebels, under such laws, to service as slaves, may, however, be justly liberated from their constraint, and made more valuable in various employments, through voluntary and compensated service, than if confiscated as subjects of property."

Transforming itself suddenly from a problem of abandoned plan-

tations and slaves captured while being used by the enemy for military purposes, the movement became a general strike against the slave system on the part of all who could find opportunity. The trickling streams of fugitives swelled to a flood. Once begun, the general strike of black and white went madly and relentlessly on like some great saga.

"Imagine, if you will, a slave population, springing from antecedent barbarism, rising up and leaving its ancient bondage, forsaking its local traditions and all the associations and attractions of the old plantation life, coming garbed in rags or in silks, with feet shod or bleeding, individually or in families and larger groups,—an army of slaves and fugitives, pushing its way irresistibly toward an army of fighting men, perpetually on the defensive and perpetually ready to attack. The arrival among us of these hordes was like the oncoming of cities. There was no plan in this exodus, no Moses to lead it. Unlettered reason or the mere inarticulate decision of instinct brought them to us. Often the slaves met prejudices against their color more bitter than any they had left behind. But their own interests were identical, they felt, with the objects of our armies; a blind terror stung them, an equally blind hope allured them, and to us they come." [6]

"Even before the close of 1862, many thousands of blacks of all ages, ragged, with no possessions, except the bundles which they carried, had assembled at Norfolk, Hampton, Alexandria and Washington. Others, landless, homeless, helpless, in families and in multitudes, including a considerable number of wretched white people, flocked North from Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas and Missouri. All these were relieved in part by army rations, irregularly issued, and by volunteer societies of the North, which gained their money from churches and individuals in this country and abroad. In the spring of 1863, there were swarming crowds of Negroes and white refugees along the line of defense made between the armies of the North and South and reaching from Maryland to Virginia, along the coast from Norfolk to New Orleans. Soldiers and missionaries told of their virtues and vices, their joy and extreme suffering. The North was moved to an extraordinary degree, and endless bodies of workers and missionaries were organized and collected funds for materials.

"Rude barracks were erected at different points for the temporary shelter of the freedmen; but as soon as possible the colonies thus formed were broken up and the people encouraged to make individual contracts for labor upon neighboring plantations. In connection with the colonies, farms were cultivated which aided to meet the expenses. Hospitals were established at various points for the sick, of whom there were great numbers. The separation of families by the war, and

Such plans came to naught for the simple reason that there was an easier way involving freedom with less risk.

The South preened itself on the absence of slave violence. Governor Walker of Florida said in his inaugural in 1865: "Where, in all the records of the past, does history present such an instance of steadfast devotion, unwavering attachment and constancy as was exhibited by the slaves of the South throughout the fearful contest that has just ended? The country invaded, homes desolated, the master absent in the army or forced to seek safety in flight and leave the mistress and her helpless infants unprotected, with every incitement to insubordination and instigation, to rapine and murder, no instance of insurrection, and scarcely one of voluntary desertion has been recorded."

The changes upon this theme have been rung by Southern orators many times since. The statement, of course, is not quite true. Hundreds of thousands of slaves were very evidently leaving their masters' homes and plantations. They did not wreak vengeance on unprotected women. They found an easier, more effective and more decent way to freedom. Men go wild and fight for freedom with bestial ferocity when they must—where there is no other way; but human nature does not deliberately choose blood—at least not black human nature. On the other hand, for every slave that escaped to the Union army, there were ten left on the untouched and inaccessible plantations.

Another step was logical and inevitable. The men who handled a spade for the Northern armies, the men who fed them, and as spies brought in information, could also handle a gun and shoot. Without legal authority and in spite of it, suddenly the Negro became a soldier. Later his services as soldier were not only permitted but were demanded to replace the tired and rebellious white men of the North. But as a soldier, the Negro must be free.

The North started out with the idea of fighting the war without touching slavery. They faced the fact, after severe fighting, that Negroes seemed a valuable asset as laborers, and they therefore declared them "contraband of war." It was but a step from that to attract and induce Negro labor to help the Northern armies. Slaves were urged and invited into the Northern armies; they became military laborers and spies; not simply military laborers, but laborers on the plantations, where the crops went to help the Federal army or were sold North. Thus wherever Northern armies appeared, Negro laborers came, and the North found itself actually freeing slaves before it had the slightest intention of doing so, indeed when it had every intention not to.

The experience of the army with the refugees and the rise of the departments of Negro affairs were a most interesting, but unfortunately little studied, phase of Reconstruction. Yet it contained in a

slaveholders were escaping military service; that it was a "rich man's war and the poor man's fight." The exemption of owners of twenty Negroes from military service especially rankled; and the wholesale withdrawal of the slaveholding class from actual fighting which this rule made possible, gave rise to intense and growing dissatisfaction.

It was necessary during these critical times to insist more than usual that slavery was a fine thing for the poor white. Except for slavery, it was said: " 'The poor would occupy the position in society that the slaves do—as the poor in the North and in Europe do,' for there must be a menial class in society and in 'every civilized country on the globe, besides the Confederate states, the poor are the inferiors and menials of the rich.' Slavery was a greater blessing to the non-slaveholding poor than to the owners of slaves, and since it gave the poor a start in society that it would take them generations to work out, they should thank God for it and fight and die for it as they would for their 'own liberty and the dearest birthright of freemen.' " [18]

But the poor whites were losing faith. They saw that poverty was fighting the war, not wealth.

"Those who could stay out of the army under color of the law were likely to be advocates of a more numerous and powerful army. . . . Not so with many of those who were not favored with position and wealth. They grudgingly took up arms and condemned the law which had snatched them from their homes. . . . The only difference was the circumstance of position and wealth, and perhaps these were just the things that had caused heartburnings in more peaceful times.

"The sentiments of thousands in the upland countries, who had little interest in the war and who were not accustomed to rigid centralized control, was probably well expressed in the following epistle addressed to President Davis by a conscript. . . .

". . . 'It is with intense and multifariously proud satisfaction that he [the conscript] gazes for the last time upon our holy flag—that symbol and sign of an adored trinity, cotton, niggers and chivalry.' " [19]

This attitude of the poor whites had in it as much fear and jealousy of Negroes as disaffection with slave barons. Economic rivalry with blacks became a new and living threat as the blacks became laborers and soldiers in a conquering Northern army. If the Negro was to be free where would the poor white be? Why should he fight against the blacks and his victorious friends? The poor white not only began to desert and run away; but thousands followed the Negro into the Northern camps.

Meantime, with perplexed and laggard steps, the United States Government followed the footsteps of the black slave. It made no difference how much Abraham Lincoln might protest that this was not a

war against slavery, or ask General McDowell "if it would not be well to allow the armies to bring back those fugitive slaves which have crossed the Potomac with our troops" (a communication which was marked "secret"). It was in vain that Lincoln rushed entreaties and then commands to Frémont in Missouri, not to emancipate the slaves of rebels, and then had to hasten similar orders to Hunter in South Carolina. The slave, despite every effort, was becoming the center of war. Lincoln, with his uncanny insight, began to see it. He began to talk about compensation for emancipated slaves, and Congress, following almost too quickly, passed the Confiscation Act in August, 1861, freeing slaves which were actually used in war by the enemy. Lincoln then suggested that provision be made for colonization of such slaves. He simply could not envisage free Negroes in the United States. What would become of them? What would they do? Meantime, the slave kept looming. New Orleans was captured and the whole black population of Louisiana began streaming toward it. When Vicksburg fell, the center of perhaps the vastest Negro population in North America was tapped. They rushed into the Union lines. Still Lincoln held off and watched symptoms. Greeley's "Prayer of Twenty Millions" received the curt answer, less than a year before Emancipation, that the war was not to abolish slavery, and if Lincoln could hold the country together and keep slavery, he would do it.

But he could not, and he had no sooner said this than he began to realize that he could not. In June, 1862, slavery was abolished in the territories. Compensation with possible colonization was planned for the District of Columbia. Representatives and Senators from the Border States were brought together to talk about extending this plan to their states, but they hesitated.

In August, Lincoln faced the truth, front forward; and that truth was not simply that Negroes ought to be free; it was that thousands of them were already free, and that either the power which slaves put into the hands of the South was to be taken from it, or the North could not win the war. Either the Negro was to be allowed to fight, or the draft itself would not bring enough white men into the army to keep up the war.

More than that, unless the North faced the world with the moral strength of declaring openly that they were fighting for the emancipation of slaves, they would probably find that the world would recognize the South as a separate nation; that ports would be opened; that trade would begin, and that despite all the military advantage of the North, the war would be lost.

In August, 1862, Lincoln discussed Emancipation as a military measure; in September, he issued his preliminary proclamation; on

V. THE COMING OF THE LORD

How the Negro became free because the North could not win the Civil War if he remained in slavery. And how arms in his hands, and the prospect of arms in a million more black hands, brought peace and emancipation to America

Three movements, partly simultaneous and partly successive, are treated in different chapters. In the last chapter, we chronicled the swarming of the slaves to meet the approaching Union armies; in this we consider how these slaves were transformed in part from laborers to soldiers fighting for their own freedom; and in succeeding chapters, we shall treat the organization of free labor after the war.

In the ears of the world, Abraham Lincoln on the first of January, 1863, declared four million slaves "thenceforward and forever free." The truth was less than this. The Emancipation Proclamation applied only to the slaves of those states or parts of states still in rebellion against the United States government. Hundreds of thousands of such slaves were already free by their own action and that of the invading armies, and in their cases, Lincoln's proclamation only added possible legal sanction to an accomplished fact.

To the majority of slaves still within the Confederate lines, the proclamation would apply only if they followed the fugitives. And this Abraham Lincoln determined to induce them to do, and thus to break the back of the rebellion by depriving the South of its principal labor force.

Emancipation had thus two ulterior objects. It was designed to make easier the replacement of unwilling Northern white soldiers with black soldiers; and it sought to put behind the war a new push toward Northern victory by the mighty impact of a great moral ideal, both in the North and in Europe.

This national right-about-face had been gradually and carefully accomplished only by the consummate tact of a leader of men who went no faster than his nation marched but just as fast; and also by the unwearying will of the Abolitionists, who forced the nation onward.

Wendell Phillips said in Washington in 1862:

"Gentlemen of Washington! You have spent for us two million dollars per day. You bury two regiments a month, two thousand men by disease without battle. You rob every laboring man of one-half of

his pay for the next thirty years by your taxes. You place the curse of intolerable taxation on every cradle for the next generation. What do you give us in return? What is the other side of the balance sheet? The North has poured out its blood and money like water; it has leveled every fence of constitutional privilege, and Abraham Lincoln sits today a more unlimited despot than the world knows this side of China. What does he render the North for this unbounded confidence? Show us something; or I tell you that within two years the indignant reaction of the people will hurl the cabinet in contempt from their seats, and the devils that went out from yonder capital, for there has been no sweeping or garnishing, will come back seven times stronger; for I do not believe that Jefferson Davis, driven down to the Gulf, will go down to the waters and perish as certain brutes mentioned in the Gospel did."

Horace Greeley was at Lincoln's heels. He wrote in August, 1862, his editorial, "Prayer of Twenty Millions," which drew Lincoln's well-known reply: "If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would also do that. What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it would help to save the Union. . . ."

"Suppose I do that," said Lincoln to Greeley, discussing general emancipation. "There are now 20,000 of our muskets on the shoulders of Kentuckians who are bravely fighting our battles. Every one of them will be thrown down or carried over to the rebels."

"Let them do it," said Greeley. "The cause of the Union will be stronger if Kentucky should secede with the rest, than it is now."

In September, 1862, Lincoln said to representatives of the Chicago Protestants:

"I admit that slavery is at the root of the rebellion, or at least its sine qua non. . . . I will also concede that Emancipation would help us in Europe. . . . I grant, further, that it would help somewhat at the North, though not so much, I fear, as you and those you represent imagine. . . . And then, unquestionably, it would weaken the Rebels by drawing off their laborers, which is of great importance; but I am not so sure we could do much with the Blacks. If we were to arm them, I fear that in a few weeks the arms would be in the hands of the Rebels. . . .

hurt vanity. Free-trade England was repelled by this program, and attracted by the free trade which the Confederacy offered. There was strong demand among manufacturers to have the government interfere and recognize the Southern States as an independent nation. The church and universities were in favor of the Confederacy, and all the great periodicals. Even the philanthropists, like Lord Shaftesbury, Carlyle, Buxton and Gladstone, threw their sympathies to the South. Carlyle sneered at people "cutting each other's throats because one-half of them prefer hiring their servants for life, and the other by the hour." [4]

As Henry Adams assures us:

"London was altogether beside itself on one point, in especial; it created a nightmare of its own, and gave it the shape of Abraham Lincoln. Behind this it placed another demon, if possible more devilish, and called it Mr. Seward. In regard to these two men, English society seemed demented. Defense was useless; explanation was vain; one could only let the passion exhaust itself. One's best friends were as unreasonable as enemies, for the belief in poor Mr. Lincoln's brutality and Seward's ferocity became a dogma of popular faith." [5]

Confederate warships were being built and harbored in English ports and in September, 1862, Palmerston, believing that the Confederates were about to capture Washington, suggested intervention to members of his cabinet. Lord John Russell wanted to act immediately, but the rebels were driven back at Antietam the same month, and the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation appeared. Gladstone and Russell still tried to force intervention, but Palmerston hesitated.

There was similar demand in France, but not as strong, because cotton did not play so large a part. Nevertheless, the textile workers in both France and England were hard-pressed by the cotton famine. Napoleon III was in favor of the South, but the mass of the French nation was not. Napoleon was assured by the Confederate government that a Southern alliance with French Mexico and a guaranty of Cuba could be had for the asking, if France would recognize the Confederacy. No danger from the North was anticipated, for Seward was certain to accept Napoleon's assurances of France's neutrality.

Public opinion stood back of the English government and was, on the whole, in favor of the South; but Garrison and Douglass by their visits, and later Harriet Beecher Stowe, had influenced the opinion of the middle and laboring classes. Nevertheless, it was reported in 1862: "We find only here and there among the Englishmen one who does not fanatically side with the slave states." Various meetings in favor of the South were arranged by the workingmen and the General Council of Workingmen's Associations opposed the pro-Southern

afraid to complain lest they be highly assessed and taxed. Offices were sold and men nominated for what they could pay. Directors of corporations plotted and nominated judges; men were sent to the United States Senate because they were lawyers for railroads, mining companies and banks; Congressional leaders were on the pay rolls of corporations. Great lawyers hired their services to rascals who were stealing, and such persons included distinguished names like David Dudley Field, who was nearly expelled from the Bar Association because of his identification with Fisk and Gould at a salary of $125,000. Editors of publications received stocks and bonds and railroad passes for publicity. Appointment to cadetships at West Point was on sale and federal offices given in return for contributions to campaign funds. The whole civil service became filled with men who were incompetent and used to paying political debts. It was common for members of Congress to take stocks and bonds in railroad and other companies when they were in position to favor these companies by voting for certain laws. A Western governor was impeached for embezzlement. The President of the United States and his family received gifts and loans from financiers.

Consolidation of railway systems began with fighting, stealing and cheating. The New York Central was financed; the Erie went through an extraordinary series of manipulations in which millions were spent; judges were bought and members of the legislature were bribed. The new method of stock-watering came into use by which actual invested capital was doubled and trebled in face value by issuing stock, and the public was compelled to pay fabulous interest on fictitious investments.

"When the annals of this Republic show the disgrace and censure of a Vice-President; a late speaker of the House of Representatives marketing his rulings as a presiding officer; three Senators profiting secretly by their votes as lawmakers; five chairmen of the leading committees of the late House of Representatives exposed in jobbery; a late Secretary of the Treasury forcing balances in the public accounts; a late Attorney-General misappropriating public funds; a Secretary of the Navy enriched or enriching friends by percentages levied off the profits of contracts with his departments; an Ambassador to England censured in a dishonorable speculation; the President's private secretary barely escaping conviction upon trial for guilty complicity in frauds upon the revenue; a Secretary of War impeached for high crimes and misdemeanors—the demonstration is complete."[1] All this was not simply the corruption of the Republican Party, as some writers insist; it ran across all lines of party and geography; it embraced all sections, classes and races. It was the disgrace of a whole nation.

efforts toward manly self-assertion were distracted by defeatism and counsels of despair, backed by the powerful propaganda of a religion which taught meekness, sacrifice and humility.

But the decisive influence was the systematic and overwhelming economic pressure. Negroes who wanted work must not dabble in politics. Negroes who wanted to increase their income must not agitate the Negro problem. Positions of influence were only open to those Negroes who were certified as being "safe and sane," and their careers were closely scrutinized and passed upon. From 1880 onward, in order to earn a living, the American Negro was compelled to give up his political power.

There was an old remedy known since the eighteenth century, the colonization movement which had resulted in Liberia. In the first Negro convention held in Philadelphia in 1833, migration to Canada was discussed and recommended, and large numbers went there. In 1853, a convention at Rochester opposed emigration, but seceders called another convention, and this convention sent emissaries to Haiti, Africa and Central America. As a result, some two thousand Negroes went to Haiti.

The war stopped thoughts of emigration, except as Lincoln proposed it. After 1876, movements arose simultaneously in several states. The first conspicuous leader was Benjamin Singleton, a Negro undertaker in Tennessee, who took two colonies of 7,432 Negroes to Kansas. Henry Adams started an even greater movement in Louisiana, sending organizers into each state in the South. It claimed, by 1879, 92,800 members in Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi and Alabama. Altogether about 60,000 Negroes went to Kansas, two-thirds of whom were destitute when they arrived. Slow individual movements of Negroes from the South to the North kept up but there were no further mass movements until the World War.

Indeed, the whole matter of migration to escape the new régime in the South was complicated by the attitude of the North. Few Northern communities wanted Negro immigrants, and labor organizations opposed them, so that it was difficult to get work. Outside the United States, growing imperialism and the treatment of Liberia, Haiti and other small colored countries made emigration less attractive; and the United States government, by permitting the spreading of unfavorable reports and putting difficulties in the way of Negro travelers, has made colored migration to the West Indies and South America difficult even to this day.

The situation settled down to a new system and a new outlook in the South. The whole history of this post-Reconstruction development