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NEGROES IN RICHMOND IN 1864

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The history of American slavery has never been written. Tons of literature have been printed on the controversial subject of slavery, but, with the exception of a few good monographs, it has been mere propaganda, and worthless as such. Slavery remains one of the most inviting of all historical fields for investigators moved by the scientific and philosophical spirit.

Such a history is needed because in its absence American slavery is sadly misunderstood. Slavery was one thing in the eighteenth century and an entirely different matter in the nineteenth, a fact that has been overlooked by nearly all writers on American history. Slavery, in the eighteenth century before the Revolution, was harsh and narrow because life tended to be so everywhere at that time and, also, because the negro slaves of that remote period were mainly savages fresh from the jungle and, as such, required strict discipline. The Revolution and the humanitarian movement contemporary with it changed the whole aspect of life, and particularly slavery. The negro slave came to be looked on as a human being with a body to be cared for and a soul to be saved. In fact, there was a strong tendency toward the emancipation of slaves in a body while hundreds of them were set free at the death of owners.

It is my opinion that general emancipation would probably have taken place about the middle of the nineteenth century but for the conditions of life in the United States. The fact that the United States was a democratic republic made against emancipation because of the problem presented in the status of freedmen in such a republic. How could the institutions of a democratic republic be adjusted to the presence of a great mass of free men who had no political rights? And yet if political rights were extended to freedmen, what would become of the states of the Lower South with a negro majority? On this dilemma emancipation was impaled. The Southern leaders, including Calhoun, perfectly foresaw the Reconstruction that was to follow the failure of the South to determine its destiny.

Since general emancipation was hardly practicable under the circumstances, at least involved enormous difficulties, the Southern planters set themselves to alter the institution of slavery so as to make it benevolent and a means of development. They succeeded in a marvelous degree. The assaults of abolitionists should not blind us to the great accomplishments made. One does not wish to be unfair to the abolitionists, who were sincere enough. The trouble with them was that they were behind the times. The slavery they described and attacked was the eighteenth-century slavery, the type that had been done away with by the Revolution. They were not aware of the new and vastly modified slavery that had come into existence in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Historians have sometimes wondered why there were no slave insurrections in the South during the War Between the States. These were not prevented by fear because in many sections all able-bodied white men had departed for the army. The reason that the negro slaves did not rise in rebellion in 1862-65 was that most of them were too well satisfied to do so. The Southern planters had evolved a type of slavery so excellent that it was, in many respects, better than freedom, as many negroes were astute enough to perceive.

The Southern planters were the greatest breed of men America has ever produced. They brought the republic into

being and ruled it wisely and honestly for many years. Their overthrow at the hands of the mechanical civilization that had grown up in the North was the greatest catastrophe that America has ever suffered. We feel its effects to this very day.

Of all the accomplishments of the Southern planters, who so closely resembled the English country gentry, none was more astonishing than the type of slavery they evolved in the years following the Revolution. The negro, instead of being treated as an alien and possible enemy, was taken into the family as a friend and partner. Indeed, on most Southern plantations the greater part of the wealth produced went to feeding, clothing and caring for the negro families that lived around the "great house". The profits of planting were absorbed in this way; there were few men of wealth in the South for the reason that wealth was "distributed" over the whole population of the plantation. Writers have denounced slavery as a wasteful economic system. It was not so at all. It was simply a system in which the workers secured what was for those times an unusually large proportion of the fruits of production.

Under the new slave system many fine workmen were produced. The mechanical ability of the negro race received every opportunity for development, something that has had its influence ever since. Under the new slave system the physical well-being of negroes was so well cared for that the splendid specimens of men and women we see today replaced the feeble, pot-bellied savages from the West Coast of Africa. Regular hours of labor under intelligent supervision trained the undeveloped negroes from the tropics to make a living in a temperate zone and in the face of competition. The earnest efforts of hundreds of Christian masters and mistresses resulted in a moral and spiritual improvement that it is difficult to describe.

Despite popular opinion, negro slaves enjoyed a considerable degree of personal freedom. They did not feel the restraints of slavery as galling, for those restraints were reasonable. Slaves were required to carry with them passports stating that they went at large by consent of their owners. This permission was usually easily obtainable, often too easily obtainable. Free

negroes, on the other hand, were most strictly supervised. They had to carry papers naming and describing them and giving their place of abode, and they were not permitted to remain for any great length of time away from their homes.

Slaves were often hired out to work for non-slaveholders; these white men who did not own slaves but who hired them were responsible for most of the cruelties inflicted on negroes in the latter days of the slave system. Many of the hirers were foreigners, and some of them almost worked the slaves they hired to death in the effort to extract the most out of them. That such an attitude was alien and hateful to the slaveowners of the South everybody who knows anything about them appreciates.

Richmond, in the period of 1861-65, was filled with negroes, free and slave. With white refugees came hundreds of negro refugees. It is notable that for the greater part of the war the slaves, forced to leave the sections occupied by the enemy, preferred to come to Richmond as slaves to escaping into the Union lines as free men. Their choice was eminently wise. The slaves that ran away to the Union were either confined in concentration camps or enlisted in the army while the slaves that came to Richmond lived as well as their masters, without much work to do and without the need of becoming cannon fodder like their brethren enamoured of liberty.

In fact, in the latter stages of the War between the States, white men sometimes envied negro slaves their exemption from the draft, which bore so relentlessly on whites. Negroes were not shipped off to training camps to freeze and starve like white men and to endure the perils of disease and battle. No, the Richmond negroes waxed fat while their betters froze and starved and went ragged in the trenches. What's in a name? Everything. Who were free: the conscripts who had to endure every imaginable hardship and the dangers of war, or the negro slaves who sat in the sunshine in the Richmond streets and laughed and ate watermelons and enjoyed life?

Because of the scarcity of white men and the abundance of negroes, and because of the fact that hundreds of these negroes were refugees from plantations, discipline was greatly relaxed in Richmond after the opening period of the war. People were too busy to bother themselves with supervising slaves, who were thus left in many cases largely to their own devices. Only at times when slaves were temporarily conscripted and set to work on the defences of Richmond did they suffer much, and such occasions were rather rare. Negroes did the work of the city, supporting themselves and their masters.

Many of them cultivated garden patches, for the Richmond of those days included large lots. Many of them became hucksters in a small way; much of the food that came to Richmond was brought by slave carters who traveled the roads leading east and northeast and brought back garden produce and seafood. Negroes were employed in building and in some manufacturing trades. They were the carriers and wagon drivers; sometimes we read of a negro's being punished for driving through Richmond at a greater speed than the four miles an hour allowed by law. Negroes did all sorts of things and fared as well as their masters, and perhaps even better. In 1864, one paid the negro driver of a dilapidated barouche or hack twenty-five dollars to take one to a party.

Richmond, in 1861, was one of the most sedate and orderly of American towns. Its police force was inadequate to handle the situation created by the sudden expansion of the population from forty thousand to a hundred thousand. It became crowded (for there was little new building) with refugees of every sort, including negroes, soldiers, deserters from both the Union and Confederate armies, speculators, fugitives, and many other human species. The small police force, which consisted of day officers and the "night watch," was almost helpless to keep order. It was assisted by the somewhat dubious detective force maintained by General Winder, Commander of Richmond.

As the war wore on petty crimes became numerous, principally thefts. Most of the thefts were committed by negroes and most of them were concerned with food or with the means

of obtaining food. By 1863 food had become scarce and high—that is, high in Confederate money. Food was relatively cheap when measured in terms of gold or even in those of “greenbacks.” Singular as it may seem, a good deal of United States money circulated in Richmond all through the war and enjoyed a high premium over Confederate currency, which was natural, as its prospects were brighter. From two or three dollars to one, Confederate money sank to ten to one in greenbacks.

In those days the mayor was police justice as well as head of the city, and in Joseph Mayo Richmond had an excellent police judge, an old man of large experience who knew perfectly well how negroes should be handled. Justice could hardly be better administered than was the case in his court. Besides, criminal law was better in those days than in ours because it was more practical.

The usual punishment for petty larceny (which had a rather wide definition) was so many stripes on the bare back—in the case of negroes; so much time in jail in the case of whites. Here the negroes certainly scored over the palefaces, for it was much better to receive a certain number of stripes (not less than ten and not more than thirty-nine) on the bare back than to languish in the filthy “cage” of that period.

Flogging was carefully regulated and was not cruel; indeed, it was not very painful. Moral effect rather than physical suffering was the end aimed at and attained to a remarkable degree. Negroes dreaded the shame of flogging more than the pain; or, rather, they dreaded the ridicule that usually attended the punishment.

Brothels were few in Richmond before 1862. However, the presence of thousands of homeless men of every shade of character brought brothels into existence. These were usually conducted by free negroes; runaway slave girls were often inmates as well as white girls, penniless and starving refugees.

Negroes were punished for most offences by the police court; only for crimes of a serious nature were they sent on to the hustings court for trial. As the war lengthened and discipline

slackened, negroes became bolder in their operations; we read sometimes of their carrying off a whole houseful of furniture. The Richmond smokehouses, of which there were many, were mercilessly raided. Food was constantly becoming scarcer and higher (in Confederate currency) and many negroes, like many whites, were suffering privations. Burglary was the result.

Strange as it may seem, burglary was sometimes punished by whipping, though generally burglars were sent on for trial to the hustings court, and, if found guilty, were sentenced to the penitentiary. Negro burglars were usually sold out of the state. But as burglary increased in 1864, the authorities felt that sterner methods were necessary. Consequently, in this year two negroes were hanged for the crime. It was an aggravated case, and the authorities hesitated for some time before inflicting the supreme penalty, but at length they did so.

The negroes were executed in the ravine where the railway now runs, the golgotha of Richmond. A thousand people gathered for the execution, most negroes, and the victims were greeted with friendly manifestations. The scene would have been comic if it had not been tragic. Owing to the bad quality of Confederate rope, this execution was a ghastly affair. It was said to be the only case of hanging negroes for burglary in Richmond; apparently it was not repeated and would not have taken place but for the fact that many negroes were getting completely out of hand and an example was believed to be necessary.

The attitude of the negro population altered in 1864. By that time many slaves (possibly a majority) were enjoying something like freedom, being little supervised by absent or harassed masters and mistresses and making a living for themselves in any way possible. Owing to the demands for workers, most slaves could find something to do, though the wages barely covered food and shelter. Exempt from military service, the free negroes and slaves continued to live in safety, if not comfort, while their white masters were undergoing the horrors of trench life at Petersburg and being killed in the incessant fighting.

The negroes, however, in this 1864, began to incline seriously toward freedom, that is, legal freedom; at this time, as has been said, their restraints as slaves were small. Probably the food problem had something to do with the change of attitude. At all events, negroes began to run the blockade north as they had not done at any time before. So many of them ran away that the authorities attempted to check the movement. Vigilance was enjoined on the pickets that guarded all the main roads north and east. It was easy, however, for negroes to take to the fields and wood until they had passed the picket posts, and this they did. How many of them left Richmond for the North in the closing months of the Confederacy cannot be known but it must have been a considerable number.

The route to the north ran by way of the Mechanicsville turnpike and thence to the Rappahannock River at Tappahannock or Bowler's Wharf. Passing that river, the trail ran to Hooe's Ferry on the Potomac River in King George County. If the fugitives succeeded in crossing that broad stream, they were free to go on either to Washington or Baltimore. This was the route followed from 1862 to 1865 by innumerable spies, blockade runners, fugitives and slaves.

Notwithstanding this exodus, the great mass of negroes remained in Richmond until the end and gave President Lincoln a tumultuous welcome when he visited the fallen capital a few days before his assassination. No longer realizing that they were nearly free and with the advantage of having white masters more or less responsible for them, the slaves believed that something in a nature of a miracle had befallen them. This feeling came on them suddenly just about the end of the war. It was only the bitter experience of later years that taught many of them that they had been better off under the mild slavery regime of the mid-nineteenth century than as freedmen in the terrible period of depression that followed 1865.