Negro Education in Alabama

A Study in Cotton and Steel

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Chapter II

THE EDUCATION OF NEGROES UNDER "THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION"

Southern legislators, said Bishop H. N. M'Tyeire in 1859, seem to have taken the view "that slavery is an older institution than schools—that it was before reading and writing or the art of printing."[1] The distinguished churchman recognized the limitations imposed upon those Christian masters who had a deep interest in the intellectual and spiritual condition of their slaves: "Circumstances have imposed a prohibition to the formal education of slaves, as a luxury beyond their condition, or an acquirement incompatible with domestic quiet."[2]

The domestic quietude of the South had been rudely disturbed in the early Autumn of 1831. A bloody massacre of men, women, and children had been engineered by Virginia slaves, and the leader was a Negro preacher, Nat Turner. Turner had been taught to read by his parents, and further instruction had been given to him by the young white man who owned him in his youth. A visionary, it was said that he had been led to revolt through reading the Bible and identifying himself with the "Moses" chosen to lead his people out of bondage.[3]

In Virginia the revolt was suppressed with the utmost rigor; but the news quickly spread throughout all parts of the South, with rumors multiplying as to the imminence of the long-feared rising of the blacks against their masters. The Governor of Virginia believed that Nat Turner had been incited by "incendiary publications" disseminated by Northern agents of abolition societies; his fears were shared widely in the South.[4] Accordingly, Southern states hastened to adopt laws whch would prevent the acquirement, by the slaves, of the accomplishments so "incompatible with domestic quiet." Where such laws already existed, they were reinforced.

Admitted to the Union in 1819, Alabama immediately adopted a slave code based upon that of Georgia. Not until 1832, the year following Turner's insurrection, was any effort made to prohibit the education of Negroes. In that year a statute was enacted making it a crime to instruct any Negro, free or slave, in the arts of reading and writing; a fine of from $250 to $500 was imposed upon persons found guility of this offense.[5] Assemblages of Negroes gathered together for any purpose, including religious exercises, were prohibited unless "five respectable slaveholders" were present, or the preacher in charge held a license from the mother church of which the slaves were members.[6]

The law of 1832 was immediately challenged by the "Creoles" of Mobile and Baldwin County, who had been guaranteed rights as American citizens by codicils attached to the treaties ratifying the Louisiana Purchase.[7] As a result of a petition addressed to the Legislature of the State in 1833, a special grant permitted the Mayor and Alderman of the city to issue licenses to "persons deemed suitable" for the instruction of the direct descendants of the original Creole population of the city and county.[8] It appears that one or more schools for these "Creole" children were maintained in Mobile County as a part of the regular school system. Expenditures of $4,440 for Mobile, listed in 1852, were allocated to "Methodist, Catholic, and Trinity Schools."[9] One sum of $1,350 was allocated "for various other schools."[10] It is probable that the "Creole" schools were among this latter number, although current oral tradition in Mobile has it that "Negro Creoles" attended Catholic schools with white children until comparatively recent years. The Census of 1860, in spite of existing statutory prohibitions of the education of Negroes, showed 114 "free colored" children in the city of Mobile attending school.[11] The editor of a Reconstruction newspaper, the *Mobile Nationalist,* was described as of "the creole class," "educated at a public school before the war, at the expense of the people of Mobile, and all the education he has is at their expense."[12]

With this possible exception, there is no record of a school for Negro children in the State of Alabama prior to 1860. Indeed, the same legislature which enacted the School Law of 1856 passed another statute entitled "To Prohibit the Teaching of Slaves to Read and Write." This law, which remained in force until the end of the Civil War, provided that

. . . . if any person or persons shall teach or be engaged in teaching, in this State, any slave or slaves to read or write, he, she, or they shall be liable to indictment therefor, and on conviction, shall be fined not less than one hundred dollars and be imprisoned in the county jail not less than three months, one or both, at the discretion of the jury trying the case.[13]

The Negroes were "thralls, wanted only for their brawn";[14] and, says Gaines, "the denial of educational opportunity to the blacks" is a fact that is indubitable.[15] The historian of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church commented on the fact that the ministers in the Alabama Conference of the denomination lacked leaders who were as "well equipped as those who were nearer to the northern border."[16] By contrast,

There were private schools for colored children in New Berne, Wilmington, Fayetteville, and some other points in North Carolina long after they ceased to be tolerated in any other part of the South, and the effect thereof is seen upon North Carolinians wherever dispersed. In Alabama and other more Southern states, the flame of intelligence in the mind of the slave was more effectually quenched; hence when emancipation came there were fewer in that section who had the intellectual capacity for the work of the ministry. The men were there . . . . they had the piety and the zeal, but the opportunity for culture had been wholly denied them.[17]

A collection of one hundred and seventy-eight biographical sketches of eminent American Negroes, published in 1887, listed but one person born in Alabama, and only two resident there.[18] One of the Alabama residents was Booker T. Washington, born and educated in Virginia, who had come to the State of Alabama but six years prior to the appearance of the biographical account.[19] The other was William H. Councill, President of the State Normal School at Huntsville, who was born in North Carolina in 1849 in slavery and sold, with his mother, into Alabama, in 1857. Councill's first schooling came in 1864. After leaving the plantation of his master in North Alabama in the wake of an invading Federal army, he entered a school for Freedmen established in the environs of Chattanooga by a Federal Army Chaplain.[20]

The sole native representative of Alabama in the volume was W. Q. Atwood, listed as "Lumber merchant and Capitalist—Orator."[21] The son of an Alabama white planter and a Negro woman, Atwood was born in Wilcox County, Alabama, in 1839. His mother was illiterate, although his father "traced his line of descent back to . . . . a surgeon in Oliver Cromwell's army."[22] As a child, he boasted, "he did not feel the curse of slavery, except in the want of a school training."[23] He received no formal education until, at the death of his father in 1853, the family with seventeen other slaves was manumitted and transported to Ohio by the terms of their master's will.[24] The Negro Congressman, James T. Rapier, had a similar background. The mulatto son of a free Negro woman and a plantation owner near Huntsville, Rapier was sent to Canada by his father, and afterward to Scotland, where he was graduated with a bachelor's degree from the University of Glasgow.[25]

There are other instances to indicate that "there were many masters who were kinder than the slave code,"[26] and that enslaved Negroes were taught by their masters, or acquired the rudimentary tools of a formal education through their own efforts, in spite of prohibitory laws. Occasionally a rare exception to the rule of enforced illiteracy appeared among the great mass of slaves. Phillips[27] quotes a letter from the slave Harford to his master, Charles Tait, dated at Mobile, November 6, 1826, six years prior to the prohibition of Negro instruction in the State:

Mobile, Nov. 6, 1826

MY DEAR MASTER

Your kind favor to me through Mr. Caulborne has been duly recd and I now hasten to answer the same and inform you how your affairs are going here. I left the plantation the 31st ultimo at which time they were coming on very well with the crop. Eighty bales had been picked, and they think they will have eighty more. I think the cotton is much cleaner than it was last year (ample room). The corn crop is very good, and I think they will have plenty for the next year . . . I am sorry to have to inform you that nine of the children have died at the plantation, mostly with the Hooping Cough . . . . There will be five births at the plantation, and among the number Nancy is to give birth to one, after a suspension of fourteen years . . . . Times have been so hard that I have made but little for myself, but I am now in hopes that I shall now do better . . . . I have another son named after myself . . . . the respects of your affec. Svt. unto D(eath) in hopes ever to merit your esteem

Your most dutiful servant,
HARFORD.

In 1827 a Georgia owner advertised in an Alabama newspaper for his "Negro girl, named Amanda," who was "a sensible girl, and speaks very correct and intelligent for a Negro."[28] The subscriber believed that Amanda had either forged a "free pass" or obtained one from some "designing white person." Evidently Amanda was a mulatto; ". . . . consequently she will attempt to pass herself off as a white person, or a free person of color."[29]

In 1850 the illiteracy of free Negroes in the State was but slightly higher than that reported for the white population, 20.7 per cent as compared to 18.9 per cent for the whites.[30] The illiteracy rate for white persons in Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee was higher than that for free Negroes in Alabama. It is probable that the favorable showing of the free Negroes of Alabama was due to the high percentage resident in the Mobile community. Yet, the 2,790 free Negroes resident in the State in 1860 represented only one-half of one per cent of the total of 437,770 members of the race enumerated in that year.

For the great majority of slaves the plantation was a school of sorts. The historian of Alabama, Thomas McAdory Owens, testified to this fifty years after the abolition of slavery and in so doing furnished a significant document with respect to the attitude of Alabama whites toward later efforts to educate the Negro. "The ante-bellum plantation was the best school the Negro ever had. Under wise and intelligent direction he developed the use of hand and muscle and strength that made him the best fixed labor in the world."[31] On this self-sustaining unit the slave artisan was an indispensable aid to the system, and owners purchased, where they could not train, skilled workers in all branches. James P. Bryan of Marengo County advertised "100 valuable Negroes for sale, including several first-rate mechanics . . . . one No. 1 Brickmason and Plasterer, and two first-rate Carpenters . . . . The remainder are well trained plantation hands, having been raised in this country, and are valuable Negroes."[32] Also listed for sale were "from 30 to 40 valuable young work mules on the same terms."

"In a certain way," said Booker T. Washington,

> every slave plantation in the South was an industrial school. On these plantations young colored men and women were constantly being trained not only as farmers but as carpenters, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, brick masons, engineers, cooks, laundresses, sewing women and housekeepers.[33]

But he added, "This training was crude, and was given for selfish purposes."[34]

In addition to prohibiting slaves from learning how to read and write the institution required that justifications for this denial of learning, so harshly criticized at the North, be built up on the concept of racial inferiority; under no other theory of the Negro intellect could slavery find any rational excuse. In 1865 a Northern soldier quoted with approval the conviction of Southern planters regarding the educational possibilities of the Negro: ". . . . It is labor lost entirely; that it would be useless to undertake such a work; and others (object) on the ground that it would be a positive injury to labor . . . ."[35] Phillips stated that among the benefits the slaves received from their education were those "invaluable texts for homilies; 'Servants, obey your masters;' 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's,' and 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant'."[36]

In all instances the participation of Negroes in religious exercises was under the closest surveillance of white persons. As the years drew on toward the outbreak of the Civil War, it became customary to separate the Negroes from the whites, where formerly the two races had worshipped together (the Negroes seated in the gallery), and to establish branch churches for the Negro members. The First African Baptist Church of Montgomery had its own officers, and in 1865 had three hundred members who worshipped with the white congregation but who were nominal members of the Negro branch. Six hundred members occupied a building of their own.[37] The African Baptist Church of Mobile was established in 1839, the Negro members of the First Baptist Church (white) of that city withdrawing to form their own church under the supervision of the white congregation.[38]

According to Fleming, after the separation of the Northern and Southern branches of the various denominations, the planters were much more enthusiastic in the forwarding of mission work among Negro slaves.[39] Many planters paid the salaries of mission preachers among their "people," and erected chapels and churches at their own expense for the use of the missionaries.[40] The Alabama Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church appropriated $340,166 for slave missions in the state between 1845 and 1864.[41] Gaines said: "It is likely that every master who was devoutly pious wanted his slaves to receive the benefit; and it is certain

that many more worldly-minded masters offered religious training for its good effect on slave order."[42]

The effect of the discipline of slavery upon the slaves was remarkable. Booker T. Washington frequently used the illustration of the Negro's loyalty to the South during the Civil War as an argument for better treatment of the race. "Cast down your bucket where you are. Cast it down among the 8,000,000 Negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your firesides."[43] The Southern planters had learned a valuable lesson from the bloody insurrections of Negro slaves in the West Indies, and from Nat Turner's in Virginia. It is, perhaps, not too cynical to believe that the qualities boasted of by Washington, and which have found their way into the pages of all of the romantic literature concerning the ante-bellum South, were less the result of a native, racial nobility of soul than of direct training. The "fidelity and love" of the Negroes "was due in a large degree to the religious training given them by white and black preachers and by the families of slaveholders."[44]

This "education," however, had serious limitations as preparation for any life outside of the mould of the institution of chattel slavery. In the debate on the Blair Bill in the Senate in 1886, Senator Morgan, lawyer, Brigadier-General of the Confederacy, and citizen of Dallas County in the heart of the old Black Belt, stated that slavery taught and enforced family disorganization and general dependence on the part of the Negroes.[45] James L. Pugh, Morgan's colleague in the Senate from Alabama, had been a member of the Confederate Congress. Testifying before the Committee on the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States (Ku Klux Report), Pugh stated that he did not believe that there were a dozen Negroes in his home county who could call the names of their candidates when they went to the polls. This ignorance he laid to slavery: "They were not allowed to read or write; they were kept in a state of utter ignorance to make them efficient as property."[46]

The peculiar circumstances surrounding the social control of the Negro population lent themselves to rationalizing the protective measures taken by the white population on the ground that Negroes were incapable of being educated in a formal sense and that the institution of chattel slavery formed the best training

ground for the limited capacities of the race. As the institution of chattel slavery dictated the type of education, or training, given to Negroes in ante-bellum days, it left an indelible stamp upon the attitudes which were to be social forces in determining the reaction of the whites to the education of Negroes in the future, after the institution itself had been abolished.