

The Negro in Rhode Island: His Past, Present, and Future

By Reverend Mahlon Van Horne, 1887

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There can be no question as to the purposes of God when we consider the history of any particular section of this country. The human family was looking for a field in which to expand into a broader and brighter life. Protestantism and a simpler worship were the burden that weighed upon the men and women who migrated to these shores. The Catholics who came to North America were aggressive and wide awake but found themselves surrounded with a dominant new spirit of civil and religious liberty. The Negro was landed in America not to catch the spirit of liberty and religious freedom which the Puritans expected. His was to be an entirely different experience. The Puritan would be schooled in the things that would draw out his self-reliant individuality in all matters pertaining to manhood. The Negro was to live in the Christian home and upon the rich plantation of the now favored pilgrim, yet the Negro is impressed with the fact by teachers in the schools, the pulpit and the press that his destiny was to be a hero of wood and drawer of water. That his individuality was to be the personality of his master.

Two hundred and forty years he bore this yoke upon his neck in Christian America. It is true there were flashes of liberty on his behalf. The efforts through all this period was like the beating of the waves against the rock bound coast. His docile and religious nature made him a lover of peace, and a willing subject. No people ever more readily assimilated a civilization than was true in this case, although the doors to positions of involvement and honor were closed against him. He lived on and hoped amid the darkest shadows.

American slavery was the most hopeless and demoralizing of any recorded in history. Every other slave code had a redeeming feature and had some ways of deliverance by faithfulness and prosperous use of spare time. In every slave state in this country, as long as the system lasted, all prosperity gained by the slave belonged to the master. Hebrew slavery had the jubilee year when all must be freed and in the year of the freedom was imperative to the slave under certain circumstances.

Where freedom was expected, the previous condition had less hold upon the freeman and less bountiful effects when liberty was obtained. What the Negro everywhere suffers from the beginning of it to today, is the lingering effects of this sum of all violence.

It is less than a quarter of a century since the letter of the law has exceeded to him the full rights of the American citizen. It is only about thirty years since the common schools were open to colored children and a little of a dozen years since Brown University, with some misgivings, matriculated its first colored student. Nobody is afraid now that colored people are in either of those places. They are not even objects of curiosity. I believe the day is coming not far off, when the Commonwealth of Rhode Island, the stomping ground of soul liberty will become the home of the free and the land of the truly brave. The home of the free, where fair play in all the walks of life will be accorded the willing workers, though their skin be dusty, and their ancestry had been plodding slaves. The land of the truly brave, in that the government and the busy commercial world will not close their doors against the employment of the Negro in those places that call into action the faculty of thought.

Men engaged in large business declare the inability to give to the colored men positions in their establishments which their ability would decide. The managers of educational work are afraid to utilize the best qualified colored teacher for fear of a strike on the part of the white teachers. Native born colored professionals must seek the south for a field of labor. Here they are met with as bitter of spirit of cast as prevailed in the jungles of India. What can, and what ought to be done with and for him in all the states whereby he has been welcomed and loyal servant? He can not be kept a race of slaves, and as an American citizen he cannot be kept a race of menial servants. Therefore, if he be done unto as the doer would wish to be done by, the problem would be solved, and the question forever settled as to his ability to fight the battles of life. He would stand alone by and by. Sixty percent of the colored people of the state are either freedmen or the descendants of freedmen. How large a part of their lives has been spent in labor that has returned them nothing? Prejudices in the various vocations of life have robbed them of an equal opportunity to success in either the moral, mental or the physical realm.

We cannot consider the Negro of today and tomorrow without considering his environment in the past and present. Very early in the settlement of the colony, the Negro was introduced as a slave. The excellent Newport Harbor and the peaceful Narragansett Bay made the three towns of Providence, Bristol and Newport leading slave entering ports. Their early prosperity was largely due to activity in this business. Newport led in vessels engaged, money invested, and in outward prosperity there from. Providence was a very close second and Bristol was near at hand. Many great fortunes had their first bloom, and their foundations cemented by the blood and sweat of unrewarded toil of these unwilling subjects.

An aged colored man who died in 1869, a member of my church who knew Dr. Samuel Hopkins personally, said that he remembered the year 1804, therefore four years before the African slave trade was made piracy by law, seeing on the very lot where Union Church now stands, hundreds of native African slaves being exercised and sunned. It is to be remembered that the colored families of the state had this humble and unfortunate beginning. If it been only domestic slavery and the Negro had been kept in the family, his kindness of heart would have won for him more human considerations.

The private secretary of Governor Wanton, the last of the Colonial Governors, was a native African freedman who had been taught by the Governor's sister who had great success as a teacher among the Negros. I have specimens of his composition and penmanship, that clearly show Cesar Lyndon to have been qualified to write state papers of that period. It was in this period and among the class that the Union Church in Newport had its beginning. There were a superior class of colored men in the state just before, during, and just after the Revolutionary War. They were men of spirit, character, and intellectual ability. They may have been selections from the number sent to Rhode Island to be shipped south. They took the trades early, became Christians, joined the churches. They were excellent singers, and even a composer of original classic music. Newport Gardner, a native of the Dark Continent, composed several pieces of music that were sung in all the churches of Newport from 1800 to 1825. It was quite a period for a musician to be popular. Musicians and preachers grown unpopular with age and experience, as the fashions change. In Newport and Providence these men born in heathen darkness organized themselves in the interest of their race before the Revolution and kept vital

statistics of their own people before towns and cities of the Colony adopted the method of familiarizing themselves with the condition of the population. In fact, it was a new feature of directing the public care.

Every white church in the City of Newport had more or less colored members. They were loyal to their individual churches and were good members. The leading men were drawn to the First Congregational Church because of the great interest taken in them by Dr. Samuel Hopkins. He believed in the Negro's ability for everything common to man. He prepared and sent to what is now Princeton University the first two colored men to enter an academic institution. They were commended most highly by Dr. Hopkins. They were driven from the college by the war of the revolution. The descendants of one of those men, Bristol Yamma, constitute one of the most respectable and largest families in Rhode Island. In the war for independence, notwithstanding the promises of royalty, they instinctively went to the side of the broadest liberty as the Negro was an instinctive Unionist in the war of the rebellion. In almost every battle for independence the Negro was found upon the side of the colonist having for and striking telling blows in common with the white patriots.

No American historic pattern is complete without a Negro in the forefront or the background because of his identity with all America's interests. The Battle of Rhode Island, which Lafayette pronounced the best fought battle of the revolution, had the Black Regiment as a prominent feature that stood in this heated contest like a stone wall. The most graphic descriptions of this battle we have seen says the members of the Black Regiment exhibited their soldierly qualities by holding a hotly contested part of the line against great odds. They evidenced their heroic bravery by the numbers of its dead who lay upon the field with their faces toward the fore.

Although they loved the home church, yet because of the social nature of the religion they sought the separate service which was held for 45 years at six o'clock Sunday evening in a room hired for that purpose by the Union Society. Many times, the regular pastor would be engaged to lead the meeting or to preach to them, although, many of them had heard the same clergyman in the morning. This may not be indisputable proof that the colored congregations are a necessity in order to reach the masses of the Afro American people; yet I do believe that

there is no place where affinity has a larger influence than in a religious community or church. This must decide the necessity for the individual church.

Congregationalism ought to do a great and good work for this people because of it emphasizing the value of the individual man. The Negro more than any other man in America has his manhood ground out of him. He has been unAmericanized for this which caused men to doubt his adaptability to the self-governing quiet methods of worship and government common in the Congregational Church. It is just this experience that is calculated to arouse his individuality and self-reliance, and to do for himself what the same polity has done for the white men in New England and the far west. It is to be expected that the masses of the colored people will be drawn to such a service in the absence of sensitive. White men have been so drawn to the Baptist and the Methodist churches, and occasionally to some of our own by men who have not been trained in schools. There are many of the masses who can only be reached by those who can go among them. With the masses will feel at home. Lay preaching, and other features have largely augmented the millions who are now involved in the Baptist and Methodist churches.

If these are facts, why was there a degradation from 1776 to 1861? First, because the white man does not like to work hard, when he can get someone else to do the hard work. Second, because American slave labor was the cheapest in the world. I think the feeling was general in 1776 that slavery was only a temporary thing and the church, the state, and the commercial world anticipated, then, an early emancipation. The greed of gain prolonged it. The Almighty dollar hushed into silence the quickened conscience the forces that liberty had kindled. The church and the state and the commercial world became silent. Though statesmen of the Jeffersonian stamp warned the people, they ratified a constitution, tolerating, permitting, and legalizing slavery. At least they left it to the choice of the state government, ratified by the general government, whether the states should be free or slave. This was the black cape that was drawn over the eyes of the goddess of liberty. It permitted slavery to the American Negro, that equals the atrocities of the fiercest savages of the Dark Ages. It suppressed hope, only as the Negro's trusting faith saw through the mists the intervention of the strong hand of God, to break asunder his bounds. In Christian practice, in human legislature, in fair play to earn his

own by the sweat of his brow "all was dark, irrevocably dark." For 85 years the spirit of America to the Afro American was that he had no rights, that the white man was bound to respect. That he could expect nothing but toil and toleration among white men. In his own, his native land, in the United States of America. It was a bridge of sighs from the adoption of the constitution to the proclamation of Abraham Lincoln, when it was clear that this country must become all free. There were schools and colleges, and excellent places for all but the Afro American. He was told that others would think for him, that he might pray and preach a little. If educated at all, it must be in an inferior class school. The result was, to a very large degree, a broken spirited people. Yet in all the wars save the Mexican American War, the Negro soldier, has been an important factor, and performed invaluable service to the government.

Our present may be considered as beginning with the completion of reconstruction and by the amended constitution which accords to the whole people every right belonging to man. The inspiration of hope is leveling the whole lump. Prejudice is the bar, however, that stands in the way now, and prevents a complete development. Mainly Christianity, and a nobler, higher, and better civilization is adjusting that.

Newport has a relatively larger colored population than any other city north of the Mason and Dixon line, and Rhode Island has a relatively larger colored population than any New England state. When are the colored people religious and what can be done for them today? They are in their own churches doing the best they know how, considering their scanty means, they are doing well. As a rule, they are industrious and frugal. It is a wonder with the American idea of a full supply of the necessities of life with meager opportunities for remunerative places, that he is able to lay by anything for a rainy day. There are at least 150 parcels of real estate owned in Newport by Afro Americans. Many of them are small, but it makes them landowners and increases their interest in all things pertaining to life. It is the life that must be gotten hold of. It is the life the philanthropist want to touch and enhance as in the life in the home, in the church, in the state and in the businesses, that all men who love the true, the beautiful, the pure and the Holy wish to the life into the front and make it everywhere available.

To make the intellect sparkle, and the heart expand into the fullness of a rounded man who thinks, moves, and lives for himself, others, and God. If the best Christian manhood is possessed, all the faculties and culture will, but the association, bring out the best that is in man. Theories may be taught in schools. The practical side of life is attained only in the field of actual work. So, in Rhode Island as in South Carolina there is the need of thought for those who may be among us but not of us because of indifference toward them, in the past, or that we have committed to other hands for development.

Only consented action on the part of a large number of men who control great business enterprise and who know how to appeal to the fairness and justice of men would bring about a common sense of Christian way of dealing with all classes. The intense selfishness of human nature has in all ages made men crafty and seek to obtain the advantage. This is the first cause of endeavoring to make someone else bear the burden while they reap the benefit. With many Christians there has been an air of unconscious influence, that has brought out sympathy and cooperation with the prevailing prejudices. A wrong of any kind brought to their notice would get at least their attention, if not their cooperation against wrong. The church is expected, without reserve, to array itself upon the side of justice and right. To place about every man the influence that will develop his better nature and bring him nearer to God.

Rhode Island is essentially Christian, and it seems to me that its very instincts are Christian and that the spirit of liberty must prevail. The future of the Negro must be assured when the hearts of Christian men are quickened to do justly to love mercy and walk humbly with God. The religious, the social, the political and the intellectual millennium cannot come till eternal right has been done to and for all people who have been permitted to dwell on this earth.

“And they shall build houses and inhabit them: and they shall plant vineyards and eat the fruit of them.”

- Isaiah 65:21

