

# Fifty Years Among Black Folks

## Prof. Du Bois Tells of Evolution of the Negro.

By Prof. W. E. BURGHARDT DU BOIS, Author of "The Souls of Black Folk."

**I**N 1859 there were 4,500,000 persons of negro descent in the United States, and of these, 4,000,000 were slaves. These slaves could be bought and sold, could move from place to place only by permission, were forbidden to learn to read and write, and legally could neither hold property nor marry. Ninety-five per cent. of them were totally illiterate, and only one adult in six was a nominal Christian.

The proportion of slaves among negroes fifty years ago was steadily increasing, and the South was passing laws to enslave free negroes. The half million free blacks were about equally divided between North and South. Those in the South were a wretched, broken-spirited lot, slaves in all but name.

The 225,000 negroes in the North were the leaven of the whole black lump, and were making a desperate struggle for survival. They aided in the anti-slavery movement, had a few newspapers, and produced leaders like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. They planned and carried through a systematic migration to Canada, where several prosperous settlements sprang up. They supported schools in many cities, founded the catering business in Philadelphia, and repeatedly held conventions appealing for justice.

For the most part their appeals fell on dead ears, although Garrison, Sumner, Phillips, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and John Brown came to their aid. The battle in 1859 was, despite all effort, going sorely against the black man. He was harried by mobs in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati. He was forced to live in the worst slums and alleys. He was either excluded entirely from the public schools or furnished cheap and poor substitutes. In 300 years only twenty negroes had received a college training.

Everywhere, save in parts of New England and partially in New York, he was entirely disfranchised and largely without civil rights. The Fugitive Slave act of 1850 was proving a bonanza for kidnappers, and in 1857 the Supreme Court had declared that negroes were not citizens and that they had always been considered as having "no rights which a white man was bound to respect."

It was at this nadir of the black man's fortunes in America, in October, 1859, that the flashlight of John Brown's raid illuminated the desperate situation. The conscience of the Nation had reached a moral impasse on slavery, having decided it at once morally wrong and legally right, and being consequently unwilling to attack it and unable to leave it alone. Beneath all their hesitation lay long and deep-seated contempt for the negro.

Here John Brown came forward with two revolutionary ideas: First, that a wrong ought to be attacked even if it involved law breaking, and, second, that the negro would fight for his freedom. His desperate raid at Harper's Ferry was called treason to his country and foolish faith in the negro. Yet two years later the whole North was fighting slavery and 200,000 negroes were helping.

Such was the situation in 1859. Fifty years later, in 1909, the 4,500,000 negro Americans have increased 126 per cent., to 10,000,000. Legal slavery has been abolished, leaving but vestiges in debt peonage and the convict lease system. The freedmen and their sons have—

1. Earned a living as free laborers.
2. Shared in the responsibilities of government.
3. Developed a vast internal organization of their race.
4. Aspired to spiritual self-expression.

The negro was freed and turned loose as a penniless, landless, naked ignorant laborer. Ninety-nine per cent. of the race were field hands and servants of the lowest class. To-day 50 per cent. are farm laborers and servants; over half of these are working as efficient modern workmen under a wage contract.

Above these have arisen 750,000 farmers, 70,000 teamsters, 55,000 railway hands, 36,000 miners, 33,000 sawmill employes, 28,000 porters, 21,000 teachers, 21,000 carpenters, 20,000 barbers, 20,000 nurses, 15,000 clergymen, 14,000 masons, 24,000 dressmakers and seamstresses, 10,000 engineers and firemen, 10,000 blacksmiths, 2,500 physicians, and, above all, 2,000,000 mistresses of independent homes, and 3,000,000 children in school.

Fifty years ago these people were not only practically penniless, but were themselves assessed as "real estate." In 1909 they owned nearly 500,000 homes, and among these about 250,000 farms, or more than one-fifth of those they cultivate, with 15,000,000 acres of farm land, worth about \$200,000,000. As owners and renters of farms they control 40,000,000 acres, worth over \$500,000,000, with a gross income of \$250,000,000.

Negroes to-day conduct every seventh farm in the land and raise every sixteenth dollar's worth of crops. They have accumulated at least \$600,000,000 worth of property in a half century, starting with almost nothing.

To-day the negro is a recognized part of the American Government; he holds 8,352 offices in the executive civil service of the Nation, besides furnishing four regiments in the army and a large

number of sailors. In the State and municipal civil service he holds at least 10,000 other offices, and he furnishes 70,000 of the 900,000 votes which rule the great States of the North and West.

In these same years the negro has relearned the lost art of organization. Slavery was the absolute denial of initiative and responsibility. To-day negroes have 35,000 church edifices worth \$56,000,000, and controlling nearly 4,000,000 members. They raise themselves \$7,500,000 a year for these churches.



W. E. B. Du Bois.  
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There are 200 private schools and colleges managed and almost entirely supported by negroes, and other public and private negro schools have received in forty years \$45,000,000 of negro money in taxes and donations. Five millions a year is raised by negro secret and beneficial societies, which hold at least \$6,000,000 in real estate. Negroes support wholly or in part over 60 old folks' homes and orphanages, 30 hospitals, and 500 cemeteries. Their organized commercial life is extending rapidly, and includes all branches of the smaller retail businesses and forty banks.

Above and beyond this material growth has gone the spiritual uplift of a great human race. From contempt and amusement they have passed to the pity and perplexity of their neighbors, while within their own souls they have arisen from apathy and timid complaint to open protest and more and more manly self-assertion. Where nine-tenths of them could not read or write in 1859, to-day two-thirds can; they

have 200 papers and periodicals, and their voice and expression are compelling attention.

Already the poems of Dunbar and Braithwaite, the essays of Miller and Grimke, the music of Rosamond Johnson, and the painting of Tanner are the property of the Nation and the world. Instead of being led and defended by others, as in the past, they are gaining their own leaders, their own voices, their own ideals. Self-realization is thus coming slowly but surely to another of the world's great races, and they are to-day girding themselves to fight in the van of progress, not simply for their own rights as men, but for the ideals of the greater world in which they live; the emancipation of women, universal peace, democratic government, the socialization of wealth, and human brotherhood.

This, then, is the transformation of the negro in America in fifty years: from slavery to freedom, from 4,000,000 to 10,000,000, from denial of citizenship to enfranchisement, from being owned chattels to ownership of \$600,000,000 in property, from unorganized irresponsibility to organized group life, from being spoken for to speaking, from contemptuous forgetfulness on the part of their neighbors to uneasy fear and dawning respect, and from inarticulate complaint to self-expression and dawning consciousness of manhood.