

## THE RURAL NEGRO COMMUNITY

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The first rural Negro communities were started in slavery times. They were established by free Negroes, who emigrated from the South, in order to escape the hardships of the "Black Laws" which, particularly in the latter days of slavery, bore with unusual severity upon the class known as "free persons of color." The establishment of the American colony of Liberia, Africa, was a result of this desire on the part of free colored people to find a place where they might escape some of the indirect burdens of slavery. Liberia, however, merely represented a widespread movement among Negroes, who had escaped slavery, to establish homes and communities of their own, not only in Africa but wherever freedom was assured them.

For a number of years before emancipation little colonies of free Negroes were established in several parts of Canada, and in states of the Middle West, especially Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, the region which, by the Ordinance of 1787, was dedicated forever to freedom. There were colonies of free Negroes established at this time in several other states—New Jersey and Michigan, for example. After the Civil War was over and Negroes were granted the same rights and the same freedom as other citizens these little rural communities tended to break up and disperse, but the remnants of them still exist in many parts of the country.

The Negro rural communities which have grown up since emancipation have had other and different motives for their existence. They have generally sprung up as a result of the efforts of Negro farmers to become landowners.

For the first twenty years of freedom there was no great disposition, so far as I can learn, on the part of Negro farmers to become landowners. During this period the Negro people and particularly the Negro leaders, were absorbed either in politics or in religion, and constructive efforts of the race were chiefly absorbed in organizing their religious life and building churches.

After the masses of the Negroes lost the influence in politics,

which they had exercised directly after the war, there was a period of some years of great discouragement. Gradually, however, it began to dawn upon the more thoughtful members of the race that there was hope for them in other directions.

They found, for example, that in communities where there was very little encouragement for a Negro to vote there was nothing which prevented him from owning property. They learned, also, that where their white neighbors were opposed to a Negro postmaster they had not the slightest objection to a Negro banker. The result was that the leaders of the race began to turn their attention to business enterprises, while the masses of the people were learning to save their money and buy land.

The first Negro bank was established in the latter part of the eighties. At the present time there are something over sixty Negro banks in different parts of the United States. In the meantime the Negro farmers, particularly in recent years, have been getting hold of the land on which they work. There are, for example, at least three counties in the South in each of which Negroes own and pay taxes on something like fifty or sixty thousand acres. In Louisa County, Virginia, Negroes own 53,268 acres; in Liberty County, Georgia, they own 55,048 and in Macon County, Alabama, Negroes pay taxes on 61,689 acres of land.

Some years ago I wrote a series of magazine articles on the subject of the Negro Town. In each of these articles I attempted to describe a distinctive type of Negro rural community. One of these was a town that had grown up around a Negro college in Ohio,<sup>1</sup> two others were towns that had been settled and built up by Negro farmers and had become the centers of Negro farming communities. One of these was Mound Bayou, Mississippi; the other was Boley, Oklahoma.<sup>2</sup>

I shall not attempt to repeat here the descriptions which I gave at that time of these Negro towns and the communities surrounding them; I only refer to them as illustrating a more general movement which has been going on, for a number of years past, on a smaller scale in other parts of the country.

It is this more general movement and the smaller and more remote farming communities it has produced that I desire to describe here.

<sup>1</sup> *World's Work*, September, 1907.

<sup>2</sup> *World's Work*, July, 1907; *Outlook*, January 4, 1908.

The first rural Negro communities that were established after the war grew up almost invariably around a little country church. The church was at this time the center around which everything revolved. It was in fact the only distinctively Negro institution that existed. It was in the church or, perhaps, in the grove surrounding it, that the political meetings were held in the days when the masses of the people were still engaged in politics. After politics had ceased, to some extent, to be a live interest the church still remained the center of the intellectual, as well as of the religious life of the people.

When I first went to Alabama I spent a large part of my time going about the country speaking to the people in the churches about the kind of education we are trying to establish at Tuskegee. Not infrequently I found that, in connection with the church, there would be a debating society which met at some time during the week to discuss questions of various kinds. After country people had ceased to discuss political questions these clubs, when they found nothing of more burning interest to talk about, sometimes got into lively debates over some good old-fashioned question such as, "Which is better, the town or the country," or "Which is more useful, the mule or the horse." I found that in these churches anyone who had any new question to present was always sure of a large and interested audience.

In more recent years, in many parts of the country, the school has, to a large extent, taken the place of the church as the center of life in the rural districts. In the early years of freedom the place of every individual was fixed in the community by the fact that he supported either the Baptist or the Methodist denomination. At present, however, the management and welfare of the school occupies, in many parts of the country at least, as large a part of the interest and attention of the community as the church.

In many cases the people have united to tax themselves, in order to build schoolhouses and to lengthen the school terms. Most of the efforts made by outside agencies, like the Anna F. Jeanes Fund, to improve the rural public schools have been directed to bringing the work of the school into closer relations with the practical interests of the rural communities.

Although in the Southern States the school officials are invariably white men, the Negro communities frequently elect trustees of

their own. These colored trustees have no legal standing, but the conduct of the school is very largely in their hands and in the hands of the "patrons," that is to say those individuals in the community who contribute something to the support of the schools.

On the whole, I believe that the control which, in this indirect way, Negroes have come to exercise over their own schools has had a good influence not only on the people, but also upon the schools. It has introduced a new interest into the life of the community. There is more to do and to think about than there used to be, and I believe I can safely say that there is a greater disposition among the people, in spite of the attraction of the city, to settle down upon the land and make themselves at home in the country districts.

Perhaps I can best illustrate the results of the changes by describing the progress which has been made, during the past eight years, in the country directly around Tuskegee Institute. Macon County, Alabama, in which the institute is situated, has a population, according to the last Census of 26,049, of which 22,039 are Negroes. The county is situated in the edge of the great prairie or Black Belt of Alabama, on which the great plantations are located. The result is that there are very striking differences in the character of the population in the different parts of the county. When, after emancipation, the colored people first began to get hold of the land, they settled as the class of poor whites before them had done, upon the light soil and cheap lands in the northern half of the county. As these settlers grew more numerous they generally formed little communities made up, for the most part, of men who owned their own lands. The majority of the Negroes, who were not willing or able to acquire lands of their own, remained as tenants on the large plantations in the southern part of the county. As might be expected there is a good deal of moving about of tenants on these big plantations. In the early days a Negro tenant felt he must move about more or less, merely in order to assure himself that he was actually free. This disposition has not yet, I am sorry to say, entirely disappeared. The result is that except in those cases where tenants have become attached to the plantation on which they work and made to feel at home there, Negro communities of tenant farmers have not been very permanent. There are, however, in Macon County several model plantation communities.

There are altogether about fifty distinct Negro farming communities in the county. Each one of these has a church and a schoolhouse, little stores, or a cotton gin belonging to some of the larger Negro landowners or to the white planter on whose land the community is located. There are about sixty business enterprises of various kinds carried on by Negroes in the county. Forty-eight of these are in the town of Tuskegee and the village of Greenwood adjoining the Tuskegee Institute and the remainder are little country stores in the country districts.

As concerns the Negro landowning communities I ought, perhaps, to say that it was not until about ten years ago that Negroes began to buy land to any very large extent in this part of the country. Down to 1900 there were not, according to the Census, more than 157 Negro farmers in Macon County who owned their own farms. At the present they number 503. Negroes pay taxes on property of the assessed value of \$419,821. The figures in the county tax assessor's office show that within a period of two years from 1908 to 1910 the tax value of lands owned by Negroes increased \$94,347.

Directly and indirectly this growth in the number of Negro landowners has been, to a very large extent, brought about by the improvement of the colored public schools throughout the county. About six or seven years ago the Tuskegee Institute was given a sum of money, in order to determine by experiment, to what extent the Negro farming communities in the surrounding county could be improved, materially and otherwise, if serious effort was made to improve the rural schools. It was not intended to use this money for the purpose of giving colored people schoolhouses and providing them with teachers. It was to be used rather to encourage them to help themselves. The money thus secured was called the Rural School Improvement Fund and in order to carry out the plan proposed a man was employed as agent, who, with the consent of the county superintendent, acted as a sort of supervisor or assistant superintendent of Negro schools. His real work consisted less, however, in supervising the work of the rural teachers than in carrying on an educational campaign throughout the county in order to stimulate the colored people to raise funds among themselves to rebuild their schoolhouses and lengthen their school terms. As a result of the campaign begun in this way colored people raised

during the next five years something like \$20,000 which was used in building schoolhouses and lengthening school terms.

As soon as a certain number of these schools were established advertisements were inserted in the colored newspapers throughout the South advertising the fact that land could be purchased in small tracts near an eight months' school. Very soon the advertisements began to attract attention. Colored farmers began to move in from the adjoining counties. Many of them came to obtain the advantages of a good country school for their children. Others came not merely for this purpose but to buy land. The effect was to bring in a more enterprising class of Negro farmers and to increase the price of land.

Meanwhile a little farmers' newspaper, *The Messenger*, as it was called, had been started for the purpose of organizing the county, stirring up interest in the improvement of the schools and stimulating the efforts of the farmers to improve their methods of farming. The preachers and teachers of the county organized an association for the purpose of pushing forward the movement. Demonstration plots were established in the neighborhood of the schools and, under the direction of the United States Demonstration Agent, the teachers began teaching farming in the schools. The preachers encouraged the movement from the pulpit and *The Messenger*, the farmers' newspaper I have referred to, made an effort to report every step that was taken, in any part of the county, looking to the education and general improvement of the people.

Through this paper the farmers of the county were brought into closer touch with the work of the Institute and the influence of the school upon the community was strengthened and deepened. In fact, it would not be far from the truth to say that the Negro communities in Macon County have made more progress during the last five years than they did during the previous twenty-five.

The work which was attempted on a small scale in Macon County, Alabama, has been undertaken in a larger way in Virginia where the state has created a state supervisor or superintendent of Negro schools, whose task has been to co-operate with and to encourage and direct the Negro people of the state in their efforts to improve the conditions of the rural schools. More than this, under the leadership of Major R. R. Moten of Hampton, what is called an "organization society" has been formed for the purpose of bring-

ing about co-operation between the various Negro organizations of the state religious and secular, to improve the school system and bring the work of the schools into closer touch with the life and practical daily interests of the people.

In what I have written I have sketched the conditions and the progress of a type of rural communities in which Negroes own, to a very considerable extent, the lands they work. A large part of the lands in Macon County are held, however, in the form of big plantations and worked by tenants. As I have already said tenants on large plantations do not, as a rule, permanently settle on the land, and, as a result, community life is not as well established. There are, however, several plantations in Macon County where something like a permanent tenant community exists. In order that I may give a definite notion of the way landlord and tenants get on together on such a plantation as I have referred to, it will not, perhaps, be out of place to repeat here the substance of a letter which I wrote to the editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser*, concerning the manner in which one of our most successful white planters, Mr. J. W. McLeod, controls the little Negro community on his plantation.

The greater part of Mr. McLeod's plantation of 1,800 acres is located in Macon County, but it extends over the line a half mile into Bullock County. At Hannon's Station, which is about the center of the plantation, there is a colored settlement of about seventy-five or eighty families. This community has a good schoolhouse, with attendance of 110 pupils. The building alone cost, I understand, about \$800, and last year the people raised \$127 to put in regular factory-made seats and desks.

For several years Mr. McLeod has followed the plan of giving an annual barbecue dinner to the tenants, making that dinner the occasion for distributing prizes among those who had made the most progress during the year, and for giving them good, wholesome advice, that would help them and encourage them to do better in the future. This year Mr. McLeod celebrated the close of the farming season by distributing \$200 in prizes among his tenants. A number of teachers from the Tuskegee Agricultural School were invited to inspect the homes and the general conditions and act as committee to assist in awarding the prizes. The committee spent two days on the place, visiting and inspecting the farms and homes of forty-one tenants.

Prizes were given to those who showed the most progress in the preparation and cultivation of the crops; to those whose stock showed the most intelligent care and treatment; to those who kept the best homes. Then there were several prizes to certain individuals for special interest in the care of stock; for making good upon a steer farm, and for making a success at rough land farming. The prizes ranged all the way from \$12 to \$25. Any man or woman guilty of drunkenness or of abusing his or her family was debarred from the contest.

The program this year was a long one. There was first an evening meeting at the schoolhouse on the day of the arrival of the committee. At this meeting there were reports on the Farmers' Improvement Club of Hannon, interspersed with singing of good old-fashioned plantation melodies. Then there was a debate in which all the farmers and their wives took part. The subject was: "Resolved, That Woman Is of More Service Upon the Farm Than a Man." The women won, "not because," as one man explained it to me, "they were really of more use than the man, but because they were better in an argument." Meanwhile the animals had been slaughtered for the barbecue and, while a crowd of laughing, happy people gathered around the pit where the two whole beeves, two hogs and four young goats were already sizzling over the glowing coals, they were entertained with coffee and buttered biscuits, spiced with much good humor and lively conversations. The next day a crowd of at least a thousand people gathered to share in the barbecue and see the prizes distributed. There were speeches by several white planters and business men, and then by several colored farmers and, finally, by the committee of teachers from Tuskegee.

I can perhaps give a better notion of the relations of Mr. McLeod to his tenants and the conditions which prevailed in the community if I quote from his letter to the judges who were to award the prizes for the year. This letter was as follows:

*To the Judges:*

I am glad to be able to report that there has been a decided improvement in conditions over 1910, as seen by me and reported by Mr. Colvard, in efforts on the farm and in the care of work stock, with the exception of three tenants.

There has been general improvement in conduct, no broils, all peaceable amongst themselves, and all seem to have regard for each other, and are ready and willing to receive advice from Mr. Colvard.



There is one case especially. This tenant had gone to the bad from the use of whiskey, but is now making a man of himself and is treating his family as a husband and father should.

I am sorry to report there is one who has not fully reformed, but I am sure that he will profit by the experience of others and during the year 1912 will stand in line with others who are trying to live sober and correct lives.

Of the women, they are keeping cleaner houses and taking better care of the children, which is a decided advance with them.

To improve the conditions of the black man along the lines I have mentioned I have given prizes during the last two years, and feel sure it has been worth while to them and paid me pecuniarily; besides it is quite a satisfaction to see them advance in all of their interests.

(Signed) J. W. McLEOD.

I might add, in conclusion, that the committee of teachers from Tuskegee who acted as judges were greatly impressed with the results that have been obtained by these methods, not only in the way of improvement upon the farms, but also in the homes. As one committee who inspected the different homes on the plantation said to me: "One woman kept her house so clean and so attractive inside and out that we were ashamed to go in it." What I have said concerning this and other Negro rural communities, both on and off the large plantations, is an indication of what can and is being made of farming life by Negroes under favorable conditions; that is to say, where they have had a chance.

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# COUNTRY LIFE



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