The Negro in Slavery Days

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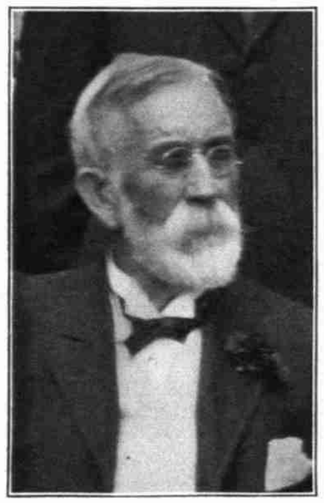
THE fact that the southern states were that part of the United States in which slave labor could only be made profitable, and that those states, particularly Virginia and the Carolinas, were settled by a class of whites of masterful spirit, and accustomed to exercise authority, was not a mere chance event, but providential. It brought the African — a wild, untutored child of the jungles, full of superstition — in contact with a race characterized by a high moral tone, decision of character, integrity, and a lofty sense of honor. The impress of that class still rests as a spell upon the minds and character of the Negro race. It was there the Negro first knew the power of that restraint and control which is so essential among all people in the making of a man.



Gen. Robert D. Johnston

The Ownership of Slaves

It was the ownership of slaves that made the wealthiest and most cultivated of the white planters. It was this life on the plantation in the country that promoted the simplicity and purity of their lives. After all that we may say and do, it is the sympathetic contact with nature that brings us in touch with God, and develops the spirit of reverence in the heart. Just as the lovely views of the great ocean and the sky from this charming home are well calculated to lift up our hearts to the great work for God and our fellow-men we have in view in this Conference, so we can readily believe that the planter and slave owner, in his isolation in the country, felt the deep responsibility of his position, with human lives, as it were, in his hands. Their methods of life were similar, in many respects, to those of the patriarchal age.

The planter, his wife, his children, and his slaves, were one family, knit together with mutual interests and in affectionate relations. The slaves of the plantation, in the olden days, were, as a general thing, as proud of the owner and his family, and as sensitive in the matter of their honor and social position, as any child could be. The character and social prominence of the family was a bone of contention between slaves of different plantations, which not infrequently terminated in actual warfare.

The Sense of Responsibility

It was this sense of responsibility that moved the planter's family to give spiritual instruction to the slaves. I venture to say that in the period preceding the Civil War, there was scarce a plantation in the old states, in which the slaves who were so disposed were not gathered together on the Sabbath day and instructed in the gospel, and the sweet stories of the Old Testament were read to them, with the white children. On some larger plantations chapels were built, and a regular minister served the colored people. Where such provision was not made, the churches where the planter's family worshiped (and the country was dotted with them) had galleries built expressly for accommodation of the slaves, and they were free to go to church. The mules and horses of the plantation were at their service for that purpose.

Readily Accepting Faith in God

These black children of the Father were very simple and childlike, readily accepting faith in God, but deeply tinged with the superstitions they brought over with them from their African home. They believed in the wonders that the medicine man could work, and nothing could drive from their minds the belief that there were men and women of their own race who had the power of conjuring. When one of their fellows was smitten with a disease beyond the diagnosis of the doctor of that day, — such as appendicitis might be,— and was in decline, they firmly believed it was the work of a conjurer, who had conceived enmity against the smitten one; and when death ensued, the spell of the conjurer was upon the whole plantation.

In their religion, they followed the fashion of the family in a large measure. Their acceptation of the truths of the gospel was very simple and childlike. They did not stagger at those things that are now so often regarded as impossible.

The Negroes were Simple and Childlike

When I was a child, upon my father's plantation there was a Negro man, about fifty years old, who could read and write, who read the Bible and conducted prayer meetings among the slaves.