

Negro History in School Curriculum

By CHARLES H. WESLEY.

DURING my experience as a teacher of history at Howard University, and as a student of history at several of America's largest institutions, I have had many opportunities to secure at first hand information concerning the knowledge which many students have had of the history of special periods and nationalities. From the very first, it has been amazing to me that there should be such an immense amount of ignorance of the facts of history as they relate to the Negro group, and such a hero-worship of the facts of history as they relate to other groups who live in America. But the main reason for this lack of acquaintance and of information concerning the Negro group is very evident. It is not the fault of the student, for his interest in nearly every case has been easily aroused in pursuit of these unknown facts. The faults may be quickly located. They may be found in the text books and in the school curricula. I have examined about twenty-five text books in the field of American history—it could not be expected that there would be a great relation between Negro History and European History; for the Negro in Medieval and Modern times has been almost a negligible factor in the history of Europe—but among the American History texts there were only two which made any other mention of Negroes than as a group of slaves and pauper free Negroes. Individual Negroes of merit are mentioned in none. Coming up under such a system, it is very apparent that Negroes cannot be expected to know anything of their past.

It is a sad experience in a child's life which brings to it the realization for the first time that there is a political, a social and an economic difference between himself and his white playmate around the corner. It is more unfortunate that this child must soon realize that his badge of color in America is a sign of subjugation, inferiority and contempt. Some of us may recall such experiences in our own lives or of those near us. My little girl came to me at one time with her hands very soiled after her play. I told her to go immediately and wash her hands. After they were washed, she returned proudly and said, "Gee, Daddy, I'm white." I replied, "No, girlie, you are not." Her answer in a very hopeful tone was, "Well, I'm nearly white"; and again I replied, "No, you are not. You are a Colored American." This experience is only typical of incidents which are occurring every day in Negro life in America. We may attempt to withhold the information as to color differences, but as long as the child lives in America, sooner or later the rude shock must come of the racial difference between it and the child of fairer face; and this child of fair face through the tradition of the street comes to realize its superiority over the child of darker face. In this way the traditions of racial differences are perpetuated. It is the statement of a well-known fact that if racial relations are to be improved, we must start with the new generation. One shock after another comes to the rising generation until the iron of bitter disappointment is burnt deep into their souls. To the one of color there comes the inevitable feeling of inferiority and the discouraging expectation that the race to which he belongs cannot and has not attained racial distinction. To the other, there comes the feeling of superiority and the expectation that because of the position of the group to which he belongs, he must claim the seat of authority over his darker brother.

Shall we allow these vicious impressions to find their way into the inner fiber of our American youth, or by a conscious effort of teaching shall we seek to remove them by substituting for personal, parental and racial traditions the more positive foundation of historical facts? Only a study of history in all of its phases and of all of its people can meet successfully the bitter experiences which are driven into the inner selves of American children by these first childhood experiences in racial contacts. The correct information may be obtained, as some of us have obtained it, in our homes, at mother's and father's knee, where we learned the wonderful stories of times past. But the task of the home has been rapidly taken over by the school, because it can be carried on more efficiently. Once the education of the human race was carried on in the home, and the great body of social tradition was transmitted by way of the parent and the elders. In the process of evolution, the school has taken over this function, for there

EDITOR'S NOTE: "Negro History in the School Curriculum" is a monograph which covers the substance of an address delivered before the Teachers' Institute of the 10th-13th Division and Allied High and Normal Schools of Washington, D. C., January 30, 1925, by Dr. Chas. H. Wesley of the Department of History of Howard University. The speech or the monograph is regarded by leading educators as a very able treatise of a subject which of late has increasingly engaged the attention of pedagogists and invited the interest of students.

the body of organized knowledge is supposed to reside either in books or in teachers. History is no longer the story of ancestral greatness or tribal glory or national aggrandizement. It deals with the entire past of humanity, with all men in all times and in all places. It is the development of man in his activities as a social being. The curriculum, so far as history is concerned, should embrace then the study of the contributions of all peoples. In the interest of a better American nation, this is particularly true of those people who have contributed to American History. It has been a recognized fact among American historians that American History should not be studied without a correlation of it with the history of the old world. This has been regarded so necessary that in the production of the important set of histories in the co-operative series known as "The American Nation," the first volume was entitled "The European Background of American History." This connection with Europe in study is explained as necessary because the American youth must take into account the origins and contributions of the nations from which our civilizations have been derived. The story of the transfer and the evolution of the contributions to civilization by the peoples of England, Ireland, France, Germany, Spain and Holland are passed in review. Is it probable that there is one group whose origins and whose contributions have been neglected by the historians of America's past? Is it true that in the chronicle of the American people there is a neglect of one section of this people? These questions must be answered in the affirmative. Negro origins and Negro contributions to America are unknown because of the text book treatment, which is written as a rule to support a particular racial bias, and also because there are teachers who do not know these facts, who do not care to know them and who are indifferent as to their diffusion.

It is my special purpose in the treatment which follows to pursue the scholarly attitude, to search for truth, to create interest in this field, to acquaint students not only with the facts which are common knowledge but also the truth from the neglected field, with the hope that the teachers who read this may be inspired to equip themselves to become the lantern bearers of the truth of history to all young America. It is hoped that the teachers of the schools of all groups may follow the treatment of this subject. Facts speak for themselves. They may prove disappointing to personal opinions, but the serious searcher for truth will expect to have his choicest opinions controverted by the discovery of new facts.

I want to ask you to think with me briefly concerning, first, the study of the Negro in Africa; second, the study of the Negro in America, and third, the advantages which are to be derived from this study. In so brief a treatise if I shall not succeed in giving to you any new information or any really new thoughts, as I briefly survey this field, I shall be satisfied if I can convey to you a point of view—the teacher's point of view in the teaching of Negro history so as to secure the greatest value to all pupils. The work of interracial committees and good-will attitudes can be immensely advanced by a different point of view on the part of the teachers of social subjects.

I. The Negro in Africa.

In the first place, let us note the place of Africa in any educational plan for the study of the history of man's past. The civilizations of the Greek, the Roman, the German, the English, the French and other nations are embraced in the modern study of history. But the treatment of the African civilization has been left to Anthropology and to Ethnology. Therefore, the first named countries have a place in the school curriculum, but the contribution of the latter element is neglected and denied a place either in courses or in the teaching of general history in the modern school. The geographies which are used in the

schools give pictures of naked savages in Africa as examples of this people. While beautiful pictures of Goth, Hun, and Vandal warriors clad in skins—which were used, by the way, not so much because of the desire to hide their naked bodies as because of the requirements of the cold climate—these pictures give concepts to young America of the glories of the European past. But why study the tribes of one continent and neglect the tribes on the other, when both of them have contributed to the making of America?

There were kingdoms in Africa as glorious and as brilliant as those of the Goths, the Vandals, the Huns, the Angles, the Saxons, the Jutes and the Franks. There were governments, laws, industrial and economic manifestations which rivaled the early kingdoms of Europe. While German savages were fighting and quarreling in the forests of Germany, kingdoms were flourishing in Africa. The Arab conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries and the later periods caused the decline of these empires. The same fate might have come to Europe if Charles Martel had not turned back the eastern conquerors as they were advancing into Europe at Tours in 732. There Christian and Mohammedan civilizations struggled, and it was determined that henceforth European civilization should be Christian and should take from the East only what was desirable for its own advancement. In Africa, the Mohammedan waves of Ottoman and Seljuk Turks swept over the African kingdoms leaving only ruins in their wake. Africa and Europe for centuries had withstood repeated assaults, but the permanent occupation of these periods gave to Northern and Central Africa the same lethargy which came to Spain until Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile had freed Spain from the Mohammedan yoke by capturing Granada in 1492 and immediately thereafter the substitution of the Inquisition and religious bigotry continued the decline of Spanish civilization.

In the study of history from the texts which are used in our schools, Africa is regarded only as a source for a labor supply and as the habitat of savages through all times and as the home of degraded civilizations and people. Unfortunately, the average historian who prepares a history text book knows little about Africa prior to the rise of the Slave Trade; and more unfortunately, if he does know of these facts, he does not see the propriety of stating them to a reading public who would not be very well pleased with the reading of it. And yet, if the object of study is to seek the truth, then it should be the purpose of the schools to give the truth to the younger generations and not the concepts which are narrowed by the special interests of text book authors.

There are volumes which are constantly bringing into our view new truth concerning the races of mankind and more especially concerning Africa and its peoples. The opening of the tombs of Kings Tiribiqua and Tutankamen has aroused new interest in things African. The continued publication of the Harvard African Studies has kept before the scholarly world the newer discoveries. Scientific, geographical and anthropological societies are having these facts presented at their occasional meetings. Our own Smithsonian Institution has not been negligent in arousing interest in this field. Not so long ago, I came across a bulletin of the Geographical Society containing an article under the caption, Did Africa People Europe? Why should not the schools join in this movement to discover and disseminate new truth? Of course, it is evident that the work of research in this field should be undertaken by those who are trained technically under competent direction for the purpose, by those who understand and by those who have visited the libraries of Europe and North Africa in search of material. Nevertheless, there is a great body of knowledge which is available to all students of history, and which all may read, understand and pass on to another who does not know. In order to be practical, I list a number of books which are accessible to teachers and busy students. Numerous other references to periodical magazines, to travels and observations, to the annals of learned societies and to volumes in the large libraries of Europe and America may be obtained through bibliographical aids. Carlisle, Edward E., and Josephine E. Historical Sketches of the Ancient Negro Kingdom of Ethiopia. Reputed Negro Rulers of Egypt. References to Ethiopia in the Bible. Queen of Sheba. Hanubal, Septimus Severus. The Cosmos Press. Cambridge, Mass., 1916. Lugard, Flora L. S. A Tropical Dependency: an outline of the ancient history of the Western Sudan. J. Nesbet & Co., London, 1905. Frobenius, Leo. The Voice of Africa. London, 1913. The Origin of African Civilization. Smithsonian Institution, Annual Report, 1898. Welner, Leo. Africa and the Discovery of America. 2 Vols. Innes & Sons, Philadelphia, 1920. Ellis, George W. Negro Culture in West Africa. Neagle Publishing Co., New York, 1914. Du Bois, Felix. Timbukto, the Mysterious. Longmans, Green & Co., 1896. Goodrich, Samuel G. A History of Africa. Louisville, 1850. Delafosse, Maurice. Les Noirs de L'Afrique. Paris, 1922. Piquet, Victor. Les Civilisations de L'Afrique du Nord. Paris, 1909. Hayford, Caseley. Gold Coast Institutions. London, 1903. Burton, R. F. Wit and Wisdom from West Africa. London, 1865. Gay, J. Bibliographie des Burages Relatifs a l'Afrique. San Remo, 1875. Paulitsche, P. Die Afrika-Literatur von 1500 bis 1750. Vienna, 1882. (To Be Concluded Next Week.)