

Two Seeming Delusions Discussed

THE GENERALLY ASCRIBED GLAMOUR OF THE OLD SOUTH.
THE ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF THE CONFEDERATE WAR.

THE REAL REASONS FOR THE SOUTH'S POVERTY.

FACTS VS. FICTION

It is the second topic that I wish to emphasize in this article. However, before discussing the effects of the war of the sixties upon the economic life of the South or particularly of North Carolina, it will be almost necessary to present a fair view of the antebellum state of affairs.

That tradition and literature have attached much false glamour to the life of the Old South is evident to one who views the matter even in the light of what remained within the memory of the immediate post-bellum youth.

When, a quarter of a century ago, the writer was teaching in a north Georgia town, an eloquent young pastor of a Gainesville church, came and delivered a lecture upon the "Old South." He glowingly pictured the great mansions, approached by avenues with great over-spreading oaks; he dilated upon the abounding hospitality, the prolonged house parties, the horses, hounds, and hunts of the usual Southern tradition of ante-bellum grandeur. It was a beautiful picture, an eloquent address. The next morning, a leading citizen of the town, brimming over with enthusiasm, expected the writer to join him in his plaudits of the address. Instead, I asked him to take me to one of those ante-bellum mansions anywhere within ten miles, whatever its then condition or if it were burned or torn down to take me at least to its site. He couldn't locate one.

Let the reader, if he is under the delusion that life in the Old South was one glorious holiday for the white population, and that mansions and plenty were the rule, make a similar test. You live in the South; tradition is not so dead that at least the sites of those splendid mansions, scenes of abounding culture, hospitality, and plenty, cannot be located if they ever existed. The writer's youth, however, was much nearer the ante-bellum period than the average reader's, and his own observations are, therefore, more definite and exact.

WEALTHY ARISTOCRATS NOT NUMEROUS

There were aristocrats, a few, and wealthy ones at that. There were other wealthy families who had not escaped from the peasant's stage of culture and manner of life, save that of the greater abundance their wealth provided and the aspirations accompanying their prosperity, resulting in educational and recreational provision for their children. To me, as an earlier post-bellum observer and interpreter, it has been a question as to which was the more effective, the Old English aristocratic strain in making the rich Southerner or economic success, in making the Southern aristocrat. Both kinds of aristocrats, I am sure, existed in 1860. Scions of prosperous peasant families of the earlier colonial days had blossomed out by that crucial date into members of the Southern aristocracy.

Location of Settlement Largely Determined Future Status of Family.

The prosperity, and therefore later social standing of the family of the colonial settler, was largely determined by his luck or judgment in choosing a homestead site. Usually the more intelligent, the more wealthy was the newly arrived colonial. Those two elements enabled him to choose his future home more discreetly. Yet some of the poor and ignorant would, almost by chance, locate wisely. The family of a real aristocrat, with a moderate share of wealth, who got badly placed would, in the course of three or four generations, probably degenerate in both social and financial standing.

It would be enlightening to compare the ante-bellum or early post-bellum status of the people of Franklin and Lisbon townships, of Sampson county, on the one hand, and that of the residents of Mingo township, on the other hand. Lisbon and Franklin had many prosperous families, and large, well-built homes, which to-day bear testimony of considerable wealth and culture. Early settlers who entered lands embracing both river bottom and turpentine areas were exceedingly fortunate. But even those who

settled a few miles from the navigable rivers had an advantage that the settlers in Mingo lacked. They had the means of perfect drainage of their lands and shipping facilities by water for their turpentine, timber, and the products of the fields; while Wilmington was only a little more than a day's drive away. Settlers in Mingo had flat pine areas difficult to drain, and a soil naturally poor when cleared. The consequence was there was more well to do and cultured people sixty years ago in Franklin township than in Mingo, and the fact, I believe, was more determined by good fortune in settlement than in the stock or status of the original settlers. The passing of turpentine and the wearing out of the sandy soils and the loss of drainage of the river bottoms by the filling of the streams with sand and the consequent souring of the lowlands, on the one hand, proved a serious blow to the earlier prosperity of the river townships. On the other hand, the passing of turpentine, the main support of the inhabitants of Mingo township in earlier days, and the discovery of the excellence of the soil when drained and improved, have turned the tables upon the former more prosperous townships. Mingo and similar areas have in recent years been the prosperous sections of Sampson and of counties of similar terrain.

However, the river townships had their backwoods areas and their "poor white trash" in ante-bellum days; while the riverless areas also had their occasional well-to-do farmer with a few slaves. Yet the writer would wager that South Clinton, Lisbon, Franklin, Taylor's Bridge, and Turkey townships, of Sampson county, had five times as many slaves in them as the other eight or ten had.

ONE IN EIGHT OWNED SLAVES

To show the utter unreasonableness of the assumption that the old South was peopled largely by rich slave holders, it is only necessary to state that statistics show that only about one family in eight owned even one slave or more. There were vast areas, like western North Carolina, where there was scarcely a slave to a county. This fact is emphasized because slaves were the badge of wealth and gentility. In some sections, like the Albermarle section of this state, there was a large sprinkling of descendants of English gentry; in parts of Virginia the same is true; also in portions of South Carolina. And these naturally had the choice of lands, or chose better, and were able to secure and maintain slaves. Accordingly while sections of the South were practically without slaves at all, other areas contained many slave-holders. It was these areas which gave rise to the delusion as to the wealth and culture of the Old South. The tradition was measurably true for those areas, but the trouble is they were few in number and comprised an exceedingly small part of the vast southland.

The Critical Period of Slavery

Despite the attachment of the slave-holders to the system, slavery was evidently not an economic success in the upper states of the South and would have proved equally unsuccessful, time given, in the deep South. Many hundreds of families had found their North Carolina lands insufficient to maintain the increasing numbers of their slaves and had moved to the new lands of Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi. In Chatham county, for instance, one may find the names of large slave owners in the census of 1790 whose family names have vanished entirely from the county. No Negroes of their names survive. The fact is generally accounted for by the families' emigration.

Slaves Sold Just as Stock.

Emigration was the solution to failing support for the family and slaves in some cases. In other cases, the difficulty was surmounted by making the rearing of slaves an industry in itself. Some large slave-holders who failed to produce enough to support the family and the horde of slaves, when they got in debt, would sell a slave or slaves to pay out, just as a farmer now would sell a cow or a colt, or a brood

of pigs. That is not guessing. The largest slave-holder in Sampson county told my father that he resorted to the sale of a slave when he ran behind as he, traditionally, often did, while the slaves, it has been said, sometimes resorted to stealing to get sufficient food. The rich new lands in the deep South afforded the market for the overplus of slaves, just as North Carolina does for Kansas mules.

Constantly, the number of slave holders was increasing. An ordinary farmer with one family of slaves found it a help. But as the slaves multiplied, as they did very rapidly, the farm would become worn out and the place too poor and small to support the larger number. My father had one family at the opening of the war. Several boys had become able-bodied men. Three or four girls were of marriageable age when freedom came. It is manifest to the son that the sandhill farm would not have supported till now one fourth of the progeny of that Negro family. True, more land might have been acquired, but only by selling the slaves like mules, for there would have been no getting sufficiently ahead to buy the additional lands needed for the multiplying slaves.

The Condition in 1860

What is here said is immediately applicable to conditions in eastern North Carolina. Much of it, excepting chiefly the reference to the turpentine industry, will apply to other slave holding sections. In brief, the older South, much of it at least, was on the verge of impoverishment.

The turpentine pines of North Carolina were fast passing. The easily cleared lands of the eastern part of this state had been worn out and the farmers knew no means of restoring them. The larger part of the people had never been well-to-do, but had eked out a mere living. The large slave-holders, as indicated above, had reached the point where they could barely, if at all, sustain the slave population, and were forced to sell slaves to the planters of the deeper South to make ends meet. And, if you have the idea that the whole area of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas is naturally fertile, you are far from the truth. The upper halves of the first three are very much like the middle section of North Carolina, while the long-leaf pine belts are practically of the identical character of that of this state. The number of fortunately located planters in those states was much smaller than you might think. The larger part of the population was of the small-farmer class, making a scanty living, as did the average man in North Carolina, and being in large measure enabled to do that because of freeranges, which provided pork and beef in larger quantities than the South has had in later years.

In middle and western North Carolina, as in all parts of the South, there was an occasional wealthy planter, or planter and merchant combined. But the lands were becoming impoverished there as in the east.

The old fields and the character of the homes that survive even to the writer's day of observation told the story just as truly as they could tell it to the ante-bellum people themselves. My observation runs back to a time only as remote from the war of the sixties as we are to-day from the world war. Simply pass, to-day, through a section of the country which was not transformed during the years of prosperity and you will have no trouble in telling what was there twenty years ago—whether it was a land of culture and prosperity. Go to Richlands, Onslow county, even to-day and you can determine that there was a really prosperous community in the olden times. Go from Mayesville, Jones county, to Swansboro, Onslow, and you will know as well as if you had seen it 75 years ago that you are passing through a country that has never been very prosperous or cultured. Greece to-day gives evidence of its culture and glory 2500 years ago.

The greater part of the South bears no testimony of having at any time been either cultured or prosperous. The evidence of house sites and little old pine fields, long ago abandoned, tell the tale of an impoverished people. On my father's tract of 750 acres there was the "Bass field", the site of a cabin and a few acres of poor land growing up in old field pines.

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