

ARTICLE III.

SOUTHERN ILLITERACY: ITS CAUSE AND CURE.

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THE illiteracy of the Southern States is not the accidental result of the war, though the disorganization of the war somewhat increased it. Nor is this illiteracy simply a circumstance of slavery. Its causes lie deeper and are intertwined with the causes of the war and of slavery, in the aristocratic constitution of Southern society.

From the start the Southern colonies inclined toward the classification of society. What attention the South gave to education was for the higher education of the few rather than the common education of the many. It is noticeable that although considerable funds for a college in Virginia were collected before any settlement had been made in Massachusetts, the death of a single man, Mr. George Thorpe, put off the project till fifty years after the founding of Harvard College.

The history of the two regions was still more divergent in the matter of common schools. The Massachusetts settlers took early steps to secure schooling for all children in the colony. A law of 1642—twelve years after the settlement—fined any citizen who neglected to teach his children and apprentices to read. Nine years later, system was introduced into public education by requiring every town of fifty inhabitants to maintain a common school, and every town of a hundred inhabitants, a grammar school, with a master able to fit youth for the university. Thus common school education for all the population grew up in Massachusetts with higher education for the few who could attend college. In Virginia

there was early talk of popular education, but Governor Berkeley's famous remark in 1670 shows that nothing had been done up to that time. "I thank God," said he, "there are no free schools, nor printing, and I hope we shall not have these hundred years."

The hope was substantially fulfilled. There were not wanting prominent men in Virginia who urged popular education. Patrick Henry, Washington, and Jefferson had many earnest allies in urging a system of general instruction, as essential to public security. During the Revolutionary war Jefferson agitated the matter, and in 1796 secured the adoption of a plan. As it did not require the maintenance of schools, but left each county to set them in motion, nothing came of it.

A new plan was tried in 1810, which succeeded only a little better, and the census of 1840 startled thoughtful Virginians by reporting nearly nineteen per cent. of her adult whites as unable to read. Vigorous efforts were made to improve the public schools. But the census of 1850 showed twenty per cent. of the white adults illiterate, and 1860 still recorded sixteen per cent.

Meanwhile Massachusetts showed only a fraction over one per cent. of illiterates in 1840, and, leaving out the enormous immigration of the recent decades, she reported less than one-half of one per cent. of her native population unable to read in 1850 and 1860.

A very different record would have been made by Virginia if there had been as deep an interest in popular education as in the higher education. Her colleges did good work. The William and Mary College had much to do with her leadership in the South, and her important position in the Nation as the early "Mother of Presidents." Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe were alumni of William and Mary College. Chief-Justice Marshall was a student there, as were twenty-seven soldiers of the Revolutionary war, fifteen senators, seventeen governors of later times, besides thirty-seven judges of various courts, as well as President Tyler and General Scott.

Two other colleges were founded in Virginia in the course of the eighteenth century: Hampden Sidney in 1774, and Washington and Lee University in 1782. In 1819 Thomas Jefferson succeeded in persuading the state to organize the University of Virginia. This last has had a most honorable career, and is now the most important college in the South. Its methods have largely influenced all the other schools originating in the South, and might be profitably studied by educators everywhere.

To a great extent Virginia set the pattern for other Southern States, and her history is full of instruction. Her illiteracy did not arise from poverty. In her early history she was by far the most prosperous of the colonies. Not till 1830 did New York overtake Virginia. The causes of Virginia's backwardness in education were not material but moral.

There was not at the first among her settlers a sufficient sense of the importance of education. There were some that felt it. One man early entreated help from England to encourage Christian education in Virginia that souls might be saved, but was profanely advised by a high dignitary to let the souls go and raise tobacco. Perhaps there was something of the same spirit in the mass of the settlers. Certainly they were not so ready to contribute of their tobacco as the Northern settlers were of their corn for the support of a college. The early neglect tended to perpetuate indifference. Ignorance is not self-curative.

The settlers that pushed on from Virginia into Tennessee and Kentucky had still less interest in education. Some of them were educated men, but they were not eager for popular education. Their conduct in neglecting to incorporate a school system into the very foundations of society gives us reason to suppose they largely shared Governor Berkeley's fears of popular education when he said: "Reading has brought disobedience, heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them. God keep us from both."

The fundamental difficulty about education in these states and in North Carolina, which sank to a more illiterate condition even than the others, was the aristocratic idea of society which so largely permeated them from the beginning. The institution of slavery grew rankly in this soil, while education of the people languished.

When the *Charleston Standard* in 1855 elaborately argued that the state should educate only the capitalists and the overseers who would work under the capitalists, it voiced the principle on which the South had long acted. About the same time Chancellor Harper, of South Carolina, in a public address to the State Society of Learning, objected to educating mere laborers, on the ground that it would not benefit a horse or an ox to give him a cultivated understanding or fine feelings. "If there are sordid, servile, laborious offices to be performed," he asked, "is it not better that there should be sordid, servile, and laborious beings to perform them?"

When a prominent man can say such things on the platform, there must be a deep undercurrent of sympathy with the sentiment in the audience. These were the very days when in Massachusetts, where every one labored, Horace Mann and his compeers were putting forth every effort so to improve the common school system of that state, as to wipe out, if possible, the fraction of one per cent. of native illiteracy.

Of course the slaves were not educated except as now and then a master or mistress wanted some favorite servant to be able to read and write. Rev. Dr. Smith, president of Randolph-Macon College, in Virginia, published in 1856 his lectures on the "Philosophy and Practice of Slavery." He explained the necessity for these lectures from the fact that all the text-books of moral philosophy had been written in New England, as the Puritan fathers had given great prominence to education. The whole book is a treat to the antiquarian, though published only thirty years ago. I call attention only to his position on the education of the slaves. He did

not object to their education in the far future, nor to the education of picked favorites in the families of their masters, but warned against educating negroes in advance of their circumstances and prospects, and also warned against exciting popular disquietude by education. This reasoning in regard to slaves is essentially the same as that which Chancellor Harper applied to all laborers. The slaves were not educated, because the master judged it best not to educate them. Only inefficient means of popular education for those who were free were provided because the ruling class did not heartily approve of educating the people.

The educational problem before the South twenty years ago was not the casual mistake or neglect of a generation. It was nothing less than changing a habit of thought that had become inveterate through long control of the organization of society. The negroes just freed by the war were an illiterate mass. The uneducated whites, especially those isolated in thinly settled districts, had become indifferent, if not hostile, to education for themselves. The class that had education in the South was largely indifferent to educating those that must work. Could a successful system be inaugurated under such conditions?

Happily the freedmen were eager to attend school. Happily, too, the far-sighted statesmen of the South realized the importance of popular education, and wisely set about making public sentiment in favor of comprehensive school systems. Hon. W. H. Ruffner of Virginia was made state superintendent of schools in that reorganized state in 1870. His first report is instructive, as showing both the condition of Virginia and his views of what was needed there.

The question whether Virginia was financially able to support an efficient school system he disposed of summarily in six pages, but devoted sixty to arguing in general the value of universal education, and in particular the improbability of even the negro. About one hundred and thirty thousand pupils were gathered in the schools that first year, but there was much difficulty in finding three thousand competent

teachers. There has been steady progress in Virginia from that day to this, till now the number of pupils enrolled is not far from three hundred thousand. When we find similar steady progress in all the Southern States with no step backward, whatever changes there have been in parties, we may well thank God and take courage.

Before folding our hands too composedly, it were, however, wise to examine more critically the actual school systems. Figures are unsafe guides unless we verify the units they represent. There are schools and schools in the same State. If one judge of Kentucky by the public schools of Louisville, he will take a rose-colored view of the prospects of the state. Louisville has provided commodious school buildings, and fitted them up in the best manner. It pays salaries sufficient to attract competent teachers. A high *esprit de corps* is kept up among them. The instruction in the colored schools, as well as the white, is of the highest order, both in methods and enthusiasm. The attendance crowds constantly on the accommodations. There is a large attendance also at night schools, which are sustained out of the public funds. So attractive are the public schools that private schools, with which Louisville was formerly filled, are losing their patronage and passing out of existence. The moving spirit in this efficient public school work is the secretary of the school board, Mr. Davis, a native of South Carolina. The pride he takes in the colored schools is, if anything, greater than that he feels on account of the white schools. He believes in education, not for some, but for all. Louisville is well on the road to overtake the cities of the North that have been long blessed with a like comprehensive school system.

Pass from this great city of Kentucky to her mountain counties, and the educational scene changes as much as the physical. Such is the prevailing ignorance that a visitor in Perry and Leslie counties this last summer reports that, in one of these counties, out of seven magistrates only one could read. The constable of the district came to this same visitor

with warrants for different men, asking to be told which was for which. The constable could not read.

Most people have no doubt that the condition of things is improving in these mountain counties, though the testimony is conflicting. The state has a school system providing at least three months of free schooling for even the most scattered population. In spite of this it is painfully evident in some places that the children are coming up with less intelligence than their parents. The remark is very common among the people themselves that they are growing worse. An old backwoodsman explained it, not long ago, to a company of visitors. "God A'mighty made this country," said he, "for the varmints. We drove 'em out, and the longer we stay the more we grow like 'em."

What is the three, four, or five months' school to which the mountain child is invited? It is held in a log school-house, probably without a window and possibly without a door. Often there is no other furniture than benches made by splitting logs and putting in short legs on the rounded side. There may be no blackboard, and I have known a mountain teacher to let the blackboard hang unused two months because he had no chalk. The provision of books and slates is on the same level with the general appointments of the house. The wages paid—now about one dollar and seventy cents per scholar, sometimes with and sometimes without board—are in most districts higher than can be had by common laborers in the vicinity, but not enough to attract good teachers. If a skilful, enthusiastic, and devoted teacher does undertake one of these schools, the result is likely to be most disappointing from the lack of appliances and the indifference of the people. Such a teacher went last summer to a community of white people only three miles off the Kentucky Central railroad. The first week more than sixty pupils poured in on her, only one-fourth of whom could read "to do any good." This showed a certain interest, especially the fact that there were married women among them who wanted to learn to read the Bible. But there was the greatest unwillingness to provide

any other book than Webster's Elementary Spelling-book. The high reputation of the teacher in this case overcame the obstacle and secured the provision of better books. But there are hundreds of schools in Kentucky where the "Blue-backed Spelling-book" is the only book provided for the majority of the pupils.

The attendance in these schools is very irregular. Many of the pupils are not clothed for cold weather. Parents let their children stay out for the slightest reasons. They keep them out almost *en masse* when they can use their labor in gathering corn fodder or making sorghum molasses. A man who has a dispute with one of the district trustees will often take his children out of school as his first move in the quarrel. It is no uncommon thing for a district with forty or fifty children of school age, to let the last two months of its legal session drag on with only ten or eight or five, or even less, in attendance.

A good teacher may do something to prevent such a falling off, but sometimes the causes are beyond the teacher's reach. The people often have no conception of any important value in education, and entirely pervert the instruction of the school system. In Jackson county two years ago, the applicants who could pass the required examination for teachers' certificates, were only about half enough for the schools. Some twelve Berea students then went into the county as teachers. One of the largest property owners in the county said it was an outrage for these people to come there and get the public money, that was intended to be paid to residents of the county. In his mind the school system was not designed to educate the county, but to furnish salaries to residents not competent to teach. This is evidently the principle on which many a school trustee in Kentucky performs the duty of his office in hiring a teacher. It is not wholly corruption; it is more ignorance. A fountain can not rise higher than its source. The low general intelligence of a community produces a school of low efficiency. Not much interest in geography can be expected in a district

where the principal man, a prosperous cattle drover who often makes business trips to Cincinnati, knows of New York only as the place where no cattle are wanted lighter than a thousand pounds, and when Massachusetts is mentioned, asks which way that is, and if it is warmer than Kentucky. The difficulty about Southern education is the lack of intelligent interest in it among the people themselves. The lack is not of means but of purpose.

There is another proof that the interest of the Southern people in education, rapidly as it has grown, is still quite inadequate to secure the best results. The great majority of the white people of the South would rather the negroes should be entirely uneducated than have them attend school with the whites. They would rather let their own children grow up without schooling than have them attend schools to which colored pupils were admitted. The public system in every one of the old slave states rigidly separates the white and colored children. I do not arraign the separation for a time in cities and populous districts, though undoubtedly it will be found best ultimately to educate together all children that are to live together in the same community. That is a question of the future in centres of large population. But at the present time the separation of races in the schools for a single year in thin settlements is a great evil. It wrongs the children of both races. In country districts the school of one's own color may be two or three miles away, and one of the other color within a hundred rods. The children must not attend the near school, but pick up what education they can by an irregular attendance at the school of their own color. Any agitation of the question of opening the public schools to all children alike is declared to be dangerous to the whole school system. The declaration means that if the whites of the South to-day were called on to choose between no public schools and mixed public schools, an overwhelming majority would vote to abandon public schools.

When one of the most successful Southern teachers was

recently expressing as emphatically as possible the spirit of honor that prevails in his school, he said, "If one of these boys should be found out lying or cheating in recitations the rest would no more let him stay than they would a *nigger*." This expression of sentiment was the more suggestive for being quite unconscious.

There is a neighborhood in Rock Castle county, Kentucky, where last year a school was supported by Northern funds, on condition that it be understood from the beginning that if colored children applied for admission they should not be refused. There were no colored people within miles of the place, so that the stipulation was purely hypothetical. But there were men in that neighborhood who besieged the trustees to have that understanding repudiated so that they could send their children. They wanted their children educated, but not enough to send them to a school whose doors were open to a hypothetical negro child who might not have become actual in ten years.

At a teachers' institute recently held at Somerset, Kentucky, one of the professors of Berea College was present the last day and a half. The commissioner availed himself of the presence of such an experienced teacher to have him present his methods of teaching some of the common school branches. He did not discuss co-education, but was known to be from Berea, which makes no distinctions on account of race. The closing day, resolutions were brought in as follows :

Resolved, That while we as teachers of the common schools of Pulaski county heartily endorse all legislation and all other influences tending in any manner to disseminate knowledge among the children of our land regardless of race or color, when restricted to their channels of separate schools for the races, and while we appreciate and extend a cordial welcome to all educators who may visit and take part in our institutes and other literary associations, yet we must with all due feeling and respect for ourselves, our patrons, and the children of our schools, protest against and denounce the recognition in our Institute of teachers and advocates of mixed schools from abroad.

2. That it is the sense of the members of this Institute that all tendencies calculated to encourage in any manner persons whose business in our community is that of soliciting pupils for such schools should be unqualifiedly discouraged.

These resolutions were finally withdrawn without a vote ;

but half the audience seemed eager to pass them, and those who spoke against them took great pains to explain that they were as much opposed to mixed schools as the rest, but thought the resolutions discourteous and at the time uncalled for.

Instances like these might be multiplied; but these are enough to show that race feeling is very strong in the Southern white population, stronger than interest in education. Educational prospects will not be entirely encouraging there until interest in education becomes stronger than race feeling. The outlook is brightening every hour, but the lack of intelligent interest in education is still a dark feature. How can this be cured?

One proposal strongly urged is that the National government, by a large appropriation, aid the Southern States in making their school systems more efficient. The most serious objection to this is the fear that it would diminish, rather than increase, local exertions for the support of schools. Already the agitation of the measure is occasionally used as a reason for not increasing state funds. Southern candidates for congress have been heard saying to their constituents, "Your children have got to be educated. Would you rather pay for it yourselves, or have the Nation pay for it?"

At best the scheme provides only money, and not the far more necessary elements of administration and enthusiasm. Certainly it would be a great calamity if any community, through looking to Washington for the support of its common schools, should cease to regard them as the chief objects of local activity and pride.

On the opposite extreme are those who would let the Southern States alone to work out the problem for themselves. No doubt they would do it in time under the slow influence of the economic mischiefs of ignorance. Who can estimate a safe rate of insurance against the evils the whole Nation might suffer meanwhile from this ignorance? The Southern States are not foreign countries, against which the other states can enforce a moral quarantine. The Nation is an organism the

whole of which must suffer from virus in any part. The South must be helped in its educational work, but help which comes as voluntary gifts will be far more efficacious than that which comes as a part of the federal taxation.

Voluntary gifts for schools express personal interest in education on the part of the giver, and so quicken interest in the recipients. There are many examples of this effect. The value of the Peabody fund in encouraging and inciting Virginia to set a general school system in motion, in 1870, was out of all proportion to the amount of money the fund yielded. That all the states have taken the colored population into their school systems, and at length on equal terms, is a result that has been greatly hastened by the missionary schools that began to teach the freedmen as soon as they came within our lines. Down to the present time the supply of colored teachers is largely drawn from these missionary schools. As for anything more than common school education for the colored people, scarcely a Southern State has yet done much, except in connection with the missionary colleges, which have taken the initiative in the higher education of the negroes, as they did years ago in their common school education.

The permanent educational institutions of any region must depend for the most part on the people themselves. The chief value of a school supported from without is as an incentive. It can give a pattern of what a school should be. It can show the effect of training on the young people it reaches. It can thus arouse a healthy ambition that will perpetuate and extend educational facilities. Such a school can be adjusted constantly to the needs and prospects of its community so as to exert the most moral power. The community can not demand its continuance as a right, as they soon might demand National aid, but must ever regard it as a personal favor by which the recipients are constantly urged to do more for themselves. Without exciting hostility against the public system by pressing unwelcome legal changes, a school independent of the state can quietly show the practicability of better ways than the state is following, and thus

prepare the way for changes as important as will be that of opening all schools alike to all races. A single example of a school actually conducted on this principle without evil results is more influential than volumes of theorizing. Already in Kentucky the former detestation of Berea has so far yielded that Democratic aspirants for the Governorship speak on its commencement platform.

The time is surely coming when the old aristocratic leaven which has cursed all the life of the South will be thoroughly purged from her educational ideals and the Southern States come into line in intelligence with those of the North. The chief means of hastening that day is the consecrated labor of men and women supported in the most needy sections by the gifts of far-seeing Christian patriots. The gifts must not be allowed to fall off, nor must the men and women shrink from the work. It is labor both for the kingdom of God and for Fatherland.