

A DESCRIPTION OF WASHINGTON PARISH, LOUISIANA
by
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Washington Parish is located in the north-eastern tip of Louisiana, bordering upon the State of Mississippi both upon its Northern and its eastern boundaries. It is in its greatest extent a portion of the "piny woods" area extending from Virginia to Texas, although its southern part is but fifty miles from the Gulf. In this continuous belt, Ulrich B. Phillips has said:

The present day prevalence of pines on the coastal plain of Virginia, and also in the Piedmont region far and wide, has come as an unintended sequel of tillage; for the forests which the settlers cleared were mostly of hard wood. The clearing and cropping exhausted the shallow humus, and the land when abandoned was too lean for any trees but pines to gain footing. If left undisturbed by man these would perhaps yield eventually to oak and hickory again, their seedlings drawing sustenance from the pine needle humus until their taproots reach depth and their laterals gain length, and the decay of their own falling leaves enriches the surface to feed a massive growth.

1. Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, p. 8-9

The Parish has been entirely separate from the French and Spanish colonizing influence which we generally associate with Louisiana. The Parish seat, Franklinton, is but 80 miles north of New Orleans, but with the exception of a few Italian families of recent settlement in the western portion of the Parish, there is but little trace of the "Latin" influence in the family names or in the customs and religion of the inhabitants. Socially and economically the Parish is a portion of that culture area which extends in the "piney woods" or "wire grass section" of the southern states, as described above by Ulrich Phillips.

In 1930, 32.5% of the population of the parish was composed of Negroes. The proportions have remained remarkably constant between the two racial groups since ante-bellum days. The census of 1850 reports a total of 2,367 whites, 4 free colored, and 1,037 slaves, or 3,408 population for the entire Parish. Negroes in 1850 were 30.4% of the population, a proportion which, as shown, has not markedly changed in the eighty years since that time.

Composition of the Population

The Parish returned in 1930 a total of 29,904 persons, as compared to 24,164 in 1920. Native whites were 19,934, or 66.7% of the population. The foreign born whites numbered only 248, or 0.8% of the population. Negroes numbered 9,719. The proportion of Negroes in the population rose from 30.6% in 1920 to 32.5% in 1930. Of the 1930 population, 14,029 resided in the city of Bogalusa, or nearly one-half of the entire population of the county. In 1930 there were 4,751 Negroes in Bogalusa, and they maintained the same general relation to the white population in point of proportion as elsewhere in the

Parish, forming 33.9% of the population of Bogalusa. As for the entire Parish, the Negro proportion of the inhabitants of Bogalusa has increased from 31.6% in 1920 to 33.9% in 1930.

By wards the Negro population is concentrated in Bogalusa, and in the area in the north-eastern portion of the Parish bordering upon Mississippi. By type of soil distribution the Negro population may be seen by a ward map of the parish to have shifted generally from the river bottoms along the Bogue Chit to and the Pearl River, the latter of which divides the Parish from Mississippi, to the hill country between these two streams. The transference of the Negro population is an index of the mobility incident to the gradual development of ownership status of the Negroes since emancipation, and their colonization in the cheap land areas of the parish where cut over timber land became available for homesteading and for purchase toward the close of the past century.

The two explorers making this report were located in Ward 8 of Washington Parish. In this ward Negroes outnumber white persons in the population 1,167 to 1,079. This is true of no other minor sub-division in the county. Ward 6 bordering upon Tanigipahoa Parish, and including for the most part territory which is hilly and has been cut over for a long period of time, has but 75 Negroes in a total population of 1,629. It is apparent that the Parish has, like the state and the South as a whole, a white and a black belt; and these areas have been remarkably constant since 1870 with the exception of the gradual filtering of Negro owners into the cheap lands in the Northern portion of the Parish.

The character of the white population and the basic configuration of the relations now existing between whites and Negroes can be suggested in a significant excerpt from the census of 1850. In that year there were only nine churches reported for the Parish, and of these five were Baptist and four Methodist. A total of 405 white families owned 1,037 slaves, or 2.5 slaves per white family. The average for the State at that time was 4.5 slaves per white family.

The ratio of illiteracy for the Parish in 1850, for the white population, shows a percentage of illiteracy for adults over twenty of 27%. Proportioned to the entire population, the ratios of illiteracy would be 13% for the white population of Washington Parish in 1850, 19% for the free colored of the State, and less than 8 for the white population of the entire State. This would indicate that the index of illiteracy, like that of slaves owned per family, would show in Washington Parish a relatively less advanced, less prosperous, less aristocratic population as compared to the State at large. In short, the white population might be described as made up, characteristically, either of "poor whites" or of the "sturdy yeomen type of small farmer" depending on the characterization deemed most suitable.

The illiteracy figures for 1930 show a decided change to the advantage of Washington Parish. In the latter year only 2.0% of the native white population was reported to be illiterate. This compares quite favorable with the 7.3% of white illiteracy for the entire state. The Negroes showed the comparatively low illiteracy of 10.4% in 1930, far below the state percentage of 25.3. These figures reflect again a decisive cultural difference between this portion of the state and the rest, as well as the advantage of schools superior to those generally found in the State for both white and black. There is no considerable dual language group in the Parish, as is to be found in the "French" parishes to the

west of New Orleans. The fact that the parish now shows for its white population a rate of illiteracy considerably below that for the state at large, is a decided change from eighty years ago; and in this change may be seen the slow rise of the small farm-owning white to greater levels of intelligence and education when freed from the dead hand of slavery.

Including the large semi-urban population of Bogalusa, there were 6,838 families listed in the Parish in 1930. Of this number 2,815 were owner families, and the balance tenants. The native whites showed 4,344 families, 2,096, or nearly fifty per cent being owner families. One hundred and twenty-six foreign white families showed a higher percentage of ownership, with 79 of these families classified as owner families, or a percentage of almost thirty per cent. The inclusion of Bogalusa in this series lowers the rate for Negroes and for whites, but more decisively for Negroes than for the former race. Of 769 Negro rural-farm families, 325 were owners, or approximately 45%, a percentage unusually high in rural southern counties and almost unique when the high percentage of Negroes in the population is concerned. Some southern counties show a percentage of Negro owner families above 80 per cent, but in all cases these counties have less than 5% of their total population comprised of Negroes. The rural non-farm Negro families, 207 in number, showed a percentage of owner families of 25%. With 1,390 Negro families Bogalusa returned in 1930 a total of 260 owner families, or 24%.

The movement of Negroes from the rural-farm areas to the small hamlets and cities, as shown by these figures, has cut almost in half the percentage of Negroes owning homes.

Size of Family

Of considerable importance in determining the nature of a community and its possibilities for preserving its numbers in a degree sufficient to insure its perpetuation from within, is the size of the family. The 1930 census classification for the first time excluded from census lists the former inclusion of such units as hotels and boarding houses as "family" units, thus affording a much more accurate description of this unit of family organization than had previously been available. The Negro families grade themselves in size according to the type of locality in which it is resident. [The typical Negro family in Bogalusa has 2.47 members, as compared to 3.75 for the white family, of native birth, and 4.10 for the white family of foreign birth. The rural non-farm Negro family of the Parish shows a median size of 2.9 members as compared to 3.41 for native whites. The rural farm Negro families constitute the only group in the parish in which the Negroes have the larger family units, with a median size of 4.49 members for the native whites and 4.56 for the Negroes. It is clear that the transition of the Negroes from rural to urban life, as represented in Washington Parish, has been accompanied by a successive decrease in the size of the family unit,] and by a family of such a small size in an industrial town like Bogalusa that Negro population could not sustain itself unless fed by migration from rural areas. The rural farm family is vigorous, fertile, and in addition to its regular members probably numbers in its midst older persons who have remained on the farm, with the young children of young mothers and fathers who have left their dependent children on the farm while adventuring in the city.

Occupations

The census classifications of occupations as given in the 1930 report is

open to numerous faults. The county lists do not permit analysis in order to show to what detailed extent Negroes are really distributed in the various skilled classifications. Such a classification, for example, as "Automobile agencies and filling stations" may give the number of whites and Negroes so employed, but it gives no slightest hint as to how many of these employees are car washers, salesmen, or mechanics. In addition, the presence of a city like Bogalusa in the total compilations masks the highly significant difference of Negroes in employment relationships in the smaller hamlets, and in the open country. A final and more decisive fault of the Census figures, of course, is that by the time they were published, unemployment had already outdated their enumerations.

Appended is a list of occupations for Washington Parish which is given for whatever good they may serve in the light of these qualifications. It will be observed that of 5,167 Negro males reported as gainfully employed in the parish in 1930, 1,082, or roughly one third, were employed in agricultural pursuits. The next largest classification is that of saw and planing mills, claiming 868 Negro males, and reflecting the employment of large numbers of Negroes in the wood and finishing plants found in Bogalusa. Together, agriculture and saw mills account for more than 60% of all Negro males gainfully employed, in the parish. An interesting contrast is afforded by the corresponding figures for whites, which show that of a total of nearly ten thousand white males, only 40% are employed in these two classifications. This indicates a much greater concentration of Negroes in a few occupations, while the spread for whites is correspondingly greater. Again, this fact reflects the familiar difficulties with problems of vocational guidance with which all Negro communities and schools are faced.

Of 1,160 Negro female workers gainfully employed in 1930, 624 were listed as in the field of domestic and personal service. While more than sixty per cent of Negro women were in domestic service, only 671 of 2,130 white women or less than 32% were so employed. This percentage is extremely high for white women, and reflects again the difference between Washington Parish, and Bogalusa, and communities and cities in less marginal areas in the South where Negro women almost entirely monopolize the field of domestic service.

The Star Creek Community

Your explorers lived in the Star Creek Community, which is one of several Negro rural community centers in the northern part of the Parish. The house occupied by the explorers was rented from a Mr. Ernest Magee. It had been deserted by him for several years, and used as an extra storage space for peas, cotton, and other crops.

The Star Creek Community is apparently about thirty years old. It is made up for the most part of Negro owners of small tracts running from 40 to 150 acres. These plots were purchased or were homesteaded, and in practically all cases the land had timber upon it at the time of purchase which largely paid for the cost of the land. All timber has been cut off the land by now, with the exception of an occasional oak thicket or pine patch which is a part of the area owned by the family, and which is used by the families for fuel.

The process appears to have been as follows. During periods of lumbering activity, the Negroes concerned accumulated enough capital to purchase these small farms at extremely low prices, with land retailing from four to five dollars per acre.

In addition, in the decade from 1910 to 1920 an occasional good crop year would permit a tenant to escape from his tenant status and to move over to the Star Creek community where he would purchase a "forty." In this land acquisition the Negroes were aided by their white relatives; for example, Mr. Tommie Graves, an old white patriarch in the neighborhood, had three mulatto daughters. When these children were married, he aided their husbands to acquire land, and gave them advice as to how to keep the land.

Star Creek Families

[One of the most interesting features of the Star Creek Community, and one which explains many of its economic and social ramifications, is the fact that most of the people are descended from approximately four parent stocks. In addition to white ancestors, it appears that the community, and that nearby communities, grew out of the practice of miscegenation and the process of bringing black men and women into the families by outside marriages with mulatto sons and daughters. Although this suspicion needs verification, it appears that there are many fewer mulatto men in the community than mulatto women, giving rise to the belief that the male mulattoes have migrated to the city, or elsewhere, while the mulatto women, favored by their white fathers, have married black tenants who have been helped to escape from the status of tenantry by the superior financial status of their wives.]

The most important families in the Star Creek Community are the Magees and the Bickhams. There is also a large family in an adjoining community, Bethel, of Wilson's. Across the creek, in the Black Jack Community, the Magees and Bickhams repeat themselves. The predominance of these family names gave rise, at first, to the supposition on the part of the explorers that here was a hangover from the assumption, during slavery and immediately afterward, of the family names of the white masters of these Negroes, for the Magees and Bickhams among white persons are numerous. However, closer investigation reveals the fact that the name similarity is in large part a direct result of miscegenation.

[These family groups are extremely large, including, with cousins, nephews, nieces, and grandchildren, from two to three hundred persons belonging to each of the major family groups] mentioned above. There has been a great deal of intermarriage, and to all intents and purposes the Wilsons are hardly to be differentiated from the Magees, or the Magees from the Bickhams. A beginning in explaining these family lines by obtaining genealogies was made by the explorers.

Organization of the Star Creek Community

The Community is extremely close knit both in its familial relationships and in its cultural and economic ties. Outstanding features of community foci of organization are as follows:

1. The School

[Unlike other rural communities in which the church is generally supposed to be the center of community life, the school is the center of community activity at Star Creek. The building itself, a three room Rosenwald School, was built by a remarkable exhibition of community cooperation, and the memory of this fact has created an additional bond for the community.]

Immediately after the War, when the price of cotton gave economic security to the community it has never since enjoyed, the members of the community obtained a Rosenwald grant-in-aid. They then rented a small saw mill, bought some timber that was still standing, and cut the trees, sawed the timber, and hauled it to the site of the school where they erected the structure.

This community experience is recalled with great pride by all members of the community. They speak of the school as "our school" in a sense that transcends the ordinary use of the term. Teachers have come and gone, but the memory of that united community and of their contribution centers the life of all in the institution, conceived not as an educational institution for the children, but as a social product as important to the adults as to the younger persons.

The school thus becomes the center for all community meetings and activities. On each Sunday, with the exception of the Fourth Sunday, a community meeting is held at the school house in the form of a Sunday school. The classes are taught by leaders in the community. The occasion is not one of great reverence, or of uncommon devoutness or religious fervor. The Sunday school simply provides an opportunity for the community to meet, to sing, to relax, and to debate. The explorers at first wished to participate in the Sunday school work, and the teaching of a class was offered to one of them. However, it was plain that the difference in enunciation, and superior knowledge of the Bible, on the part of the explorers, served to destroy precisely the virtue which the Sunday school had for the participants. Eager debaters who before would have argued violently over a disputed point in the lesson now fell silent from fear of reproach, of exposing ignorance, or from other sources of shyness. The explorers tried their best to remove this self-consciousness on the part of the people of the community in their Sunday school, and have considered it one of their major failures that the feeling of ease and fellowship evidenced in other groupings seemed to fail where the Sunday school was concerned. It also seems important enough to note as one of the difficulties of the "uplift" which might not be experienced by persons of a more truly determined and religious frame of mind than the explorers.

+ [In addition to the Sunday school, which is purely recreational, the school is the meeting place for the Community Fair Association.) The explorers met (this community body,) which (is formed of all persons of substance in the Community) (a distinction worth noting), at the time when it was probably most active, as, the crops having been laid by, the Association was preparing for its annual community fair. (The persons prominent in the workings of the Fair association were also those prominent in the Sunday school, the Church, and the care and fostering of school activities.) As a matter of fact, much of the interest in the "school" is actually the interest the members of the community feel in their "school building" as their community center.

The school proper has three trustees, who represent the community in meeting with the ward member of the parish board of education and in presenting claims of the school upon the board. These trustees are three substantial men of property, older men all three of who are above fifty years of age, and who are among the oldest residents in the community.