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Freedom Triumphant: Embracing Joyful Freedom but Facing an Uncertain, Perilous Future

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*Overcoming: The Inspiring Story of America's Newly Freed Slaves,
Our Other Greatest Generation*

Chapter 1 Freedom Triumphant

Embracing Joyful Freedom but Facing an Uncertain, Perilous Future

Lunsford Lane, an intrepid slave/entrepreneur in North Carolina long before the Civil War years, sacrificed sleep to work tirelessly on side jobs over many years to eventually buy his own freedom. He eloquently described his feelings on that joyous day:

When the money was paid to my mistress and the conveyance fairly made to Mr. Smith, I felt that I was free. And a queer and a joyous feeling it is to one who has been a slave. I cannot describe it, only it seemed as though I was in heaven. I used to lie awake whole nights thinking of it. And oh, the strange thoughts that passed through my soul, like so many rivers of light; deep and rich were their waves as they rolled... But I cannot describe my feelings to those who have never been slaves... He who has passed from spiritual death and received the witness within his soul that his sins are forgiven, may possibly form some distant idea, like the ray of the setting sun from the far off mountain top, of the emotions of an emancipated slave. That opens heaven. To break the bonds of slavery, opens up at once both earth and heaven.¹

One can scarcely comprehend the unspeakable joy the freed slaves must have felt in mass when the Civil War ended and freedom began. Imagine such rejoicing amongst millions simultaneously. The Northern occupying troops of

¹ Lane, 1845, p. 9.

the Reconstruction period helped establish full citizenship, including voting rights, leading to the election of many former slaves to high office. Public education was established for the former slaves, with the federal government covering 60% of the costs, 35% paid by churches, and the remainder covered by tuition and donations.² There was much grand talk of land redistribution, with “forty acres and a mule” going to every family of freed slaves.³

However, with rare exception, land redistribution did not happen; the dream of former slaves quickly becoming land owners died. In fact, the words, “forty acres and a mule,” became a sarcastic catch phrase among the liberated slaves, summing up their disappointment with the federal government.⁴ In the end very little was done to help the former slaves move into their new life. Though disappointing, it is not surprising that more resources weren’t spent to help the former slaves in transition. Oceans of blood and treasure both were consumed in our deadliest, most savage war, at a time of little technology when the nation was still relatively poor.⁵ Many whites were nearly as destitute as the freed slaves. The South was physically and economically devastated, further sacrifice by the North to rescue Southern blacks just wasn’t politically

² Though an important foundation these public schools set up by the federal government in the Reconstruction period annually taught only 5-7 percent of black children (Welch, 1973, 52).

³ Higgs, 1980; O’Neill and O’Neill, 2012.

⁴ Higgs, 1980.

⁵ If the federal government, rather than fighting, had purchased the freedom of every single slave at market value in 1861, and bought for them those 40 acres along with a mule, they would have spent less than they actually did spend to fund the deadly war, Hummel and Majewski, 2013. And, of course, no one would have died and slavery would have ended years sooner. (There was precedent for this peaceful approach; when the British abolished slavery in the British West Indies in 1834 slave owners received 20 million pounds in compensation.) However, the Union never made this purchase offer, and many slaveholders probably would have rejected it if they had. Hindsight is, indeed, always 20/20 vision.

feasible.⁶ In a few years the Northern troops left and, in the late 1870s a harsh reality set in. Voting rights, though not completely denied, were limited and under constant assault. Equal protection under the law was generally as imaginary as the land grants.⁷

The jubilation that the newly liberated people felt soon gave way to the harsh realization that they were still in a very dangerous predicament, sailing into a storm-filled sea with every swift current and howling wind against them. For example, with no safety net in place, death rates for freed slaves immediately after emancipation shot up, especially for the elderly and the very young. They were unchained but destitute, uneducated and illiterate with no further government aid and only limited support from private charity.

Against All Odds: The Astounding Triumphs of the Former Slaves

Frederick Douglass, who escaped slavery and went on to become a great abolitionist, social reformer and the leader of his race, summed up the situation perfectly:

We have only to reflect for a moment upon the situation in which these people found themselves when liberated. Consider their ignorance, their poverty, their destitution, and their absolute dependence upon the very class by which they had been held in bondage for centuries, a class whose every sentiment was averse to their freedom, and we shall be prepared to marvel that they have, under the circumstances, done so well.⁸

⁶ Hummel and Majewski, 2013; Higgs 1980.

⁷ Du Bois, 1971; Stamp, 1965; Higgs, 1980.

⁸ Higgs, 1980, p 37.

Facing the Seemingly Impassable Obstacles

Perhaps their greatest challenge was a Southern legal system stacked against them. In any dispute with a white employer or creditor the newly free could not reliably seek redress in court. In any business conflict, a black person who even angrily disagreed with a white person risked possible imprisonment under some invented charge (Higgs, 1980). Lynching, execution without any semblance of due process by a mob for an alleged but generally unproven serious crime, posed the ultimate risk. The NAACP reports there were at least 3,446 blacks lynched (and 1,297 whites) in the U.S. from 1882 to 1968, a majority in the South. Members of these lynch mobs would no doubt have argued that these killings were often just punishment rendered to murderers and other vicious criminals. Lynching generally was triggered as a response to a horrific crime of murder and/or rape. But, when mobs dispensed “justice” to an alleged criminal there was, of course, a high probability that they executed the wrong person. Moreover, lynch mobs did not always focus on alleged evildoers, frequently their wrath spilled over onto anyone in their way.⁹

One might expect that the newly free would have fled the South in large numbers, and there was an early trend in that direction. However, many of those who left soon returned. For example, there was a mass exodus to Kansas

⁹ Here is a gruesome, graphic example, not for the faint of heart: On May 19, 1918 Mary Turner was viciously killed by an angry lynch mob in Brooks- Lowndes County, Georgia. Earlier her husband had been lynched by a gang convinced he had murdered a local plantation owner. Mary Turner loudly proclaimed her husband’s innocence and threatened to have his killers arrested. The mob bound her, soaked her in gasoline, and set her on fire and cheered as she burned to death. Before the fire killed her, though, they hacked open her stomach, jerked out her unborn baby and stomped it to death in front of her (NAACP, 2019).

farms that crested in 1879, but optimal farming techniques were very different from what they had known in the South, and of course, the climate far more harsh. In 1880, the following year, the former slaves began to abandon Kansas in mass, with most returning South. Experiences in Northern cities were also, quite often, disappointing. Though Northern governments were usually less biased, at least initially, economic discrimination was often intense in the North (and West), sometimes even worse than in the South, for reasons we'll discuss shortly. Also, for many blacks with some skill, teachers for example, their main market was black consumers, not often available in concentrated numbers outside of the South. The upshot of all of this was that the geographical distribution of former slaves between North and South was not significantly different in 1914 than in the year of emancipation, 1865. This is slightly deceiving in that there was some substantial relocation to Northern cities, but in those cities fertility was lower and death rates higher.¹⁰ Thus, some net emigration to the urban North was offset by greater population growth and longer life spans in the more rural South.¹¹

So, the question for the newly freed was this: Was it better to stay in the South where economic opportunities were generally better (or, maybe we should say, less bad) but equal protection under the law was a cruel joke? Or, was it better to embark on a difficult move North where government was less biased, and where social prejudice was probably also less, but economic

¹⁰ Fertility was higher on farms probably mainly because in the low-tech farming of the time children could be productive farm hands at very young ages, adding a significant incentive to have larger families. Death rates were higher in cities mainly because the greater population density resulted in more deadly disease epidemics in a time when medicine was quite primitive, Higgs, 1980.

¹¹ Higgs, 1980; Washington, 2012; O'Neill and O'Neill, 2012.

opportunity not as good? In the end, the newly free pursued their best economic opportunities, which meant they generally stayed in the South, working hard to build a better life.

However, lack of education and often complete illiteracy tremendously hampered their quest for upward mobility. (It had commonly been illegal in the South to teach a slave to read before the war.) Public education was grudgingly made available, but government funding for black schools was miserly, with no prospect of altering that since blacks were commonly, if not universally, denied voting rights. Plantation owners sought to reduce payments to black share tenants by forming cartel agreements to keep compensation artificially low. They also strove to establish an almost de facto return to slavery by preventing black share croppers from moving away, threatening to have them jailed on trumped up charges if they dared to leave. It was difficult for blacks to become landowners since they were so poor and had great difficulty in obtaining sufficient lines of credit. When intrepid former slaves did manage to set up their own farms this sometimes triggered a violent response, known as “white capping.” That is, white farmers formed organizations to brutally harass blacks operating their own farms in order to drive them to come back to work for whites on their plantations and farms. When intimidation didn’t work they beat blacks, fired shots into their houses and even burned down their homes.¹²

In addition to all these problems blacks struggled against swindlers in their own ranks. Desperate to find easier, prestigious work, some of the newly freed fraudulently presented themselves as teachers though they could barely

¹² Higgs, 1980.

write their names. Of course, illiteracy was so high, being able to write your name was often enough to impress, and gain that teaching job. Others posed as educated, godly preachers though they knew nothing of the Bible and were basically crooks intent on robbing their own flock.¹³

Pervasive prejudice manifesting in countless ways overtly weighed down the newly free, discouraging them from even applying for higher level jobs deemed to be beyond their station. A bigoted society insisted blacks should “know their place” and refrain from being “uppity.” That some would lose hope, give into despair under all these crushing burdens is understandable. When the future looks hopeless it is difficult to feel motivated to invest in that future. Why work hard to educate yourself, to gain experience and become more productive when life is so uncertain that you can’t even be sure you will be allowed to enjoy the future fruits of your labor? W.E.B. Du Bois, the first African-American to receive a PhD from Harvard and a leading intellectual of the period, summed up the bleak outlook:

The higher classes of white labor are continually being incorporated into the skilled trades, or clerical workers, or other higher grades of labor. Sometimes this happens with Negroes but not often. Consequently we find the ranks of the laborers among Negroes filled to an unusual extent with disappointed men, with men who have lost the incentive to excel, and have become chronic grumblers and complainers, spreading this spirit further than it would naturally go. . . . Any one of these [discriminatory] things happening now and then would not be remarkable... but when one group of people suffer all these little differences of treatment and discriminations and insults continually, the result is either discouragement, or bitterness, or over-sensitiveness, or recklessness. And a people feeling thus cannot do their best... many of them say... "I never apply—I know it is useless." . . . The social environment of excuse, listless despair, careless indulgence and lack of inspiration to work is the growing force that

¹³ Norrell, 2009.

turns black boys and girls into gamblers, prostitutes and rascals. And this social environment has been built up slowly out of the disappointments of deserving men and the sloth of the unawakened.¹⁴

Many Southerners believed the former slaves were incapable of working hard and in fact expected the race to die out. Those more sympathetic toward them, with somewhat more faith in their work ethic, were nevertheless afraid that there were just too many insurmountable objects in their way. It seemed most of the country, friend and foe alike, thought the whole race might indeed perish, hardly anyone expected them to thrive.¹⁵ This overwhelming majority could not have been more wrong.

The Miraculous Achievements of the Freed Slaves and How They Did It

Their suffering was unbelievable but, in the end, it is fair to say they triumphed. This is in no way to minimize the wrongs they endured or to overlook their hardship. It does not seem wrong, of course, to look back and feel sorry for these newly freed people. But it does seem quite wrong to overlook their astounding accomplishments, to think them weak, hapless victims when, in reality they showed greater strength than, perhaps, anyone in the history of this country has ever demonstrated. There were some, understandably, who floundered; no doubt a significant number were seriously impaired by the post-traumatic stress of slavery. But, on the whole they were more inspiring heroes than pitiful victims.

Sir George Campbell, who had worked as a British administrator in India,

¹⁴ Du Bois, 2016; Higgs, 1980.

¹⁵ Higgs, 1980.

visited the U.S. in the late 1870s and wrote a book, *Black and White: the Outcome of a Visit to the United States*, based on his observations. Perhaps, his relative newness to the U.S. left him free of preconceptions so he could immediately see what would eventually become apparent to everyone:

"They cannot take care of themselves," it is said; 'they can neither take care of their children, nor manage themselves in sickness, nor bring themselves to sanitary laws and habits, now that the benevolent eye of the slave-owner is withdrawn. It is a mere matter of time; they must die out in the end.'" It is really quite surprising how seriously this is said, when it is so directly contrary to fact. It is patent to the eye that they are not a people who have the least intention of dying out.¹⁶

As time unfolded, rather than perishing in large numbers from malnutrition and disease, their population flourished. In the 1860s black population grew about 21%, 22% in the decade of the 1870s though the growth was at a slower rate after that. By 1915, the black population had grown to around 10 million, about doubling in the five decades since liberation.¹⁷

Black mortality rates fell substantially; life expectancy grew by about six years from 1880 to 1910. However, the true increase was substantially greater.

Lifespan gains were not fully captured in available statistics because there was no adjustment for the significant black population shift to cities, where lifespans were shorter¹⁸

¹⁶ Campbell, 1879.

¹⁷ U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1918, p. 29; Higgs, 1980, 16-17.

¹⁸ In other words, lifespans increased for both city dwellers as well as those living in rural areas but since there was large movement to cities, where epidemics were more serious and lifespans shorter, the overall increase in lifespan was much smaller than it would have been had rural dwellers stayed put, Higgs, 1980.

Moreover, since there were no significant medical or public health innovations or other broad changes, the only plausible explanation for the falling mortality rates was improvement in living conditions—better nutrition and housing from rising incomes.¹⁹ To understand just how spectacular the rise in black income was consider that per person growth in real income in the U.S. from 1774-1860 was 0.80 percent annually, not bad.²⁰ However, growth in blacks' real income per capita from 1867 to 1900 was more than three times as fast, averaging about 2.7% annually! The income of whites in that same period grew much less, though still very impressive, coming in at a little less than 2% annually.²¹ True, black incomes were growing from a low base and incomes were still much lower than whites; but to have growth in income more than 1/3 greater than the more privileged race was an extraordinary achievement. How did they do it? How did they pull this rabbit, actually more like pulling an elephant, out of their hat?

Superhuman Work Ethic

In hindsight, it should have surprised no one that a people who had been forced to labor so exhaustively as slaves would naturally embrace the hardest work when the benefits would at last flow to them and their loved ones rather

¹⁹ Meeker, 1976; Higgs, 1980, pp 20-23.

²⁰ Lindert and Williamson , 2012.

²¹ Higgs, 1980, 102. Assembling income data for this period is challenging. Professor Higgs pulls together bits and pieces from many disparate sources to form an estimate. The 2.7% figure is in the middle of the range of feasible estimates, though even the lowest feasible estimate is well over 2%. The key point of verification is that the income estimates jibe nicely with survey data on consumption, which also showed increasing discretionary donations to things like churches and schools. Again, it also appears the increase in life expectancy can only have been caused by a rapidly rising income, with attendant benefits in nutrition and housing.

than to harsh masters. We should, perhaps, not be surprised that people who endured slavery would generally resist discouragement so thoroughly, would think most subsequent hardships to be more bumps in the road than deadly pitfalls. We can better understand the strength of the newly free when we understand a bit of what they felt as slaves. Let us again turn to the words of the always eloquent Lunsford Lane, writing about the first time in his childhood that he was old enough to fully comprehend that he was a slave:

And then there was the fear that I might be sold away from those who were dear to me, and conveyed to the far South. I had learned, that, being a slave, I was subject to this worst (to us) of all calamities; and I knew of others in similar situations to myself, thus sold away... the idea of being conveyed to the far South seemed infinitely worse than the terrors of death. To know, also, that I was never to consult my own will, but was, while I lived, to be entirely under the control of another, was another state of mind hard for me to bear. Indeed all things now made me feel, what I had before known only in words, that I was a slave. Deep was this feeling, and it preyed upon my heart like a never dying worm.²²

Thankfully, not too long after that realization, Mr. Lane experienced an epiphany, and felt a distant but profound hope:

One day... my father gave me a small basket of peaches. I sold them for thirty cents, which was the first money I ever had in my life... the hope that then entered my mind of purchasing at some future time my freedom, made me long for money; and plans for moneymaking took the principal possession of my thoughts. At night I would steal away with my axe, get a load of wood to cut for twenty-five cents, and the next morning hardly escape a whipping for the offence.²³

²² Lane, 1845. p. 4.

²³ Ibid, p. 5.

His extra nighttime work occurred after putting in a demanding full day's work for his owners. But he was more than an extremely hard worker, very entrepreneurial and clever as well. Mr. Lane and his father, in their "spare time" at night eventually developed a unique treatment of tobacco that greatly increased its flavor, and it was mainly the income from their small tobacco business that helped Mr. Lane accumulate, over many years, enough money to buy his freedom.²⁴

Actually, it was not as rare as one would expect for slaves to earn their own freedom in the manner of the remarkable Mr. Lane. For instance, in Virginia's Northampton County in 1664 about 44% of slaves there had earned their freedom.²⁵ In 1850 New Orleans had the greatest number of slaves who had become free, over a thousand strong.²⁶ Every slave worked hard all day for their masters. Then many would then work on into the long hours of the night for themselves and loved ones, some for many years as they patiently saved up meager earnings to finally buy their freedom. This persevering work ethic was a portent of the working miracles that freedom would bring.

After slavery, labor force participation by blacks was much greater than that of whites, especially among women. Taking both genders together, in 1890, 58% of blacks worked outside the home, versus 47% of whites.²⁷ There seems to be no formal data on hours worked but we know black income grew much faster than that of whites. Since higher income must be the result of either higher wages or more hours worked (or possibly both) we can narrow the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Schweninger, 1990, p. 16; Williams, 2011, Chp 2.

²⁶ Reinders, 1965; Williams, 2011, Chp 2).

²⁷ U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1918, pp, 503-504; Higgs, 1980.

root of faster income advances to either work effort or hourly rates. We'll discuss wages more below but the evidence suggests, as one would expect, that it was longer hours that produced the income growth difference. Certainly the anecdotal evidence, along with the higher labor force participation, indicates that blacks simply worked harder.

For example, the newly freed working as share croppers (meaning they were paid largely with a share of the crop) would spring up at dawn and head out the door eating a small breakfast on their way out. Their wives and children would soon join them in the fields and work right beside them, with only the youngest children free to play in the area, while babies laid on blankets near their moms. "Quality family time," except, maybe on Sundays, consisted of time spent working together to build a better life. As time passed and more blacks owned their own land the work pattern was exactly the same. It was normal to see cotton or other crops planted right up to the doorway of the family's primitive cabin to make productive use of every foot of land (Norrell, 2009). Wilbert Jenkins, author of *Seizing the New Day*, pointed out:

Through the daily struggle to survive under slavery, blacks had gained the mental and spiritual strength needed to deal with the economic hardships of the Reconstruction era. As slaves they had fended for themselves, neither expecting nor receiving much in the way of handouts from whites. Carrying this expectation of self-reliance into the Reconstruction period, they were appreciative of the services provided by various benevolent agencies, but their actions indicated that they did not expect acts of charity or regard them as crucial.²⁸

Families were working so hard constantly mainly to save up to pay for

²⁸ Jenkins, 2003, p. 76.

their children's education. But, families would, understandably, also splurge sometimes for something a little extravagant. Fancy clocks, for example, were common in the homes of these former slaves. Booker T. Washington, college president and the most prominent though somewhat controversial black leader of his era, wrote of the time he visited a student's family living in a modest cabin with the typical dirt floor but with a grand organ taking up precious space in the corner. They were paying on a monthly installment plan for the \$60 organ, a huge sum for the times. Washington, a stickler for teaching students proper hygiene, was somewhat dismayed when he noticed there was only one fork on the table as he and the four family members sat down to eat. Worse, family custom was simply to share the fork, passing it around as needed! That this family of four owned a \$60 organ but just one fork greatly amused him.²⁹

Booker Washington was a former slave who became the most famous black leader of the day. His politics, which we will take up later, became controversial, with many liberal critics arguing he was not forceful enough in denouncing racism. But, politics aside, he was a heroic advocate and fundraiser for black education. He helped start and became the founding president of the historic Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, and then was instrumental in establishing and funding numerous "small Tuskegee Institute" offshoots. The word "normal" referred to academic studies, and "industrial" meant that students also learned a trade, such as brick laying, as they worked and studied at Tuskegee. A variety of disciplines were taught and trades practiced though most students went on to become either outstanding teachers or preachers, especially in the early days.

²⁹ Washington, 2010.

In his first autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, Washington published the Institute's formal schedule which made for a very busy day. The extremely long day began with the ringing of the 5 a.m. morning bell and ended with the ringing of the retirement bell at 9:30 p.m. In between there was virtually no leisure time, except for meals, 20 minutes for breakfast and dinner but 30 for a "leisurely" lunch. Students were either in class, working or studying pretty much every minute of that day. For promising but penniless students, there was an option to work full time, ten hours a day, 60 hours a week, and then take two hours of classes at night³⁰. The pattern for this was set in the days of slavery in that if a slave was to have any time at all to pursue their own interests it was only after devoting a long day to working for their owners.

With close to zero wealth and low incomes, hard work was essentially the only option to make education viable for blacks.³¹ Virtually none of the students or their families could pay much, so the Tuskegee Institute had to use student labor to keep costs low and produce products to create revenue streams. Almost all of the buildings at Tuskegee were built by students, and the college became known for the quality of bricks they produced. The young agricultural scholars learned practical skills as they produced crops for sale. Graduates

³⁰ Holden, 2016; Washington, 2012. Washington himself sometimes had this same arrangement as a student at the Hampton Institute, led by Christian missionary and retired Northern general, General Samuel C. Armstrong. The Tuskegee Institute essentially followed the Hampton model and it was Armstrong and other Hampton supporters who helped mastermind Tuskegee; Armstrong selected young Booker T. Washington to lead at Tuskegee.

³¹ Private charity mainly from Northerners was also instrumental. However, it seems that most major contributors, such as Rockefeller or Carnegie, did not donate huge sums until an institute like Tuskegee had a proven track record. The greater philanthropy was generally used to expand opportunities to more students, not at all to reduce the intense work load required of them Washington, 2012; Holden 2016.

were sent back into society, often to teach and preach, but also to teach trades, proper hygiene and strong, professional work ethics.³²

Strong Family Ties

Again, as with work ethics in the slave community, we can see the antecedents of the strong family values that emerged with liberation from slavery. In the days of slavery, marriage was frequently not allowed, and even when allowed often not respected by owners if breaking up families enhanced sale values. But as much as possible, couples generally stayed together. In a study of slave families, Gutman found that in about 75% of cases all the children had the same mother and father.³³ A study of 1847 black families living in Philadelphia found that ex-slave families were more likely to be two-parent families than were free-born blacks.³⁴ Another study found that 90 percent of black households, where the head had purchased his freedom, included two parents.³⁵

Once freed, the former slaves, as one would expect given knowledge of the slave culture's true history, exhibited a strong commitment to marriage. In fact, the data indicates black couples were slightly more committed to each other than white couples of the day. However, there are some measurement complexities. Back then marriage licenses or marriage bonds were often surprisingly expensive. For instance, the parents of the famous entrepreneur Sarah Breedlove (aka Madam C.J. Walker), were truly committed to each other for years before they could afford to pledge the \$100 marriage bond to make their loving union officially legal.³⁶ In such tough times formal marriage license data paints a highly misleading picture; births counted as

³² Holden, 2016; Washington, 2012.

³³ Gutman, 1976; Williams, 2011.

³⁴ Furstenberg, et al, 1975.

³⁵Hershberg, 1971; Williams, 2011.

³⁶ Bundles, 2001.

occurring “out of wedlock” were often nothing of the sort. This created a completely mythological appearance that the newly free were often promiscuous. The truth only emerges with more careful study. For example, in an analysis of both black and white family structure in 1880 Philadelphia, it was found that *75.2 percent of black families had both parents present while the percentage for whites was 73.1 percent.*³⁷ U.S. census data on marriage was also more accurate because it surveyed actual couples rather than just counting marriage licenses. *Marriage rates were slightly higher for blacks than whites as measured in every U.S. census from 1890 to 1940.*³⁸ (1890 was the first year the census began recording the data).

More broadly, the freed slaves generally exhibited a sort of “we are all family” attitude, as Booker Washington relates:

Perhaps the thing that touched and pleased me most in connection with my starting for Hampton was the interest that many of the older coloured people took in the matter. They had spent the best days of their lives in slavery, and hardly expected to live to see the time when they would see a member of their race leave home to attend a boarding-school. Some of these older people would give me a nickel, others a quarter, or a handkerchief.³⁹

These elderly people were dirt poor, facing an uncertain economic future, particularly given the limitations of age, and they were no relation to Booker. Yet, they behaved like generous grandparents who could certainly spare some coins, significant sums in the 1800s, for a favorite grandchild. Moreover, these nickel and quarter contributions added up very significantly and were crucial to the timely launching of his monumental career. One

³⁷Furstenberg et al, 1975; Williams, 2011. Of course, the absence of a parent frequently was because that parent was deceased.

³⁸ Census Bureau, 1992; Sowell, 1995.

³⁹ Washington, 2012.

cannot say that Washington would not have made it without the help of these kind “grandparents”—he seems to have been an unstoppable force, like so many of his people, who would have somehow succeeded no matter what. But they certainly added much speed to his trip on the road up. Considering how badly the newly free and the entire country needed Washington’s leadership in black education, these generous contributors were all heroes and heroines in their own right. This same heroic support was similarly lavished on Washington’s classmates and later on his students. In those days it truly did take a village to fund a black student’s education. And the “villagers,” poor though they were, stepped up.

Washington and his immediate family exhibited this same spectacularly generous spirit. Although his mother supported him and his older brother on her own as a single parent, she nonetheless adopted another orphaned slave boy younger than Booker. Washington’s older brother, John, struggled mightily to earn a little extra money to help fund Booker’s education. Later, Booker returned the favor to help fund John’s schooling, then the two of them teamed up to sponsor their younger, adopted brother.⁴⁰

Commitment to Education

In discussing the strong bonds of family and community we have already seen something of the newly free’s dedication to the pursuit of education. But this is only the tip of an iceberg the size of a continent. The literacy rate of slaves in 1865 was extremely low. Counting blacks who were free, perhaps overall black literacy was 5 percent, certainly not more than 10%. In the 1870 census it was reported to be 20%, a remarkable jump, then in 1910

⁴⁰ Holden, 2016.

it was 70 percent! However, as Higgs points out, the census did not conduct rigorous literacy testing, but just conducted surveys; it's quite likely the figures overstate literacy somewhat. Still, there is no reason to suppose people were markedly less truthful over time. So a literacy rate 3.5 times higher after just 4 decades is both plausible and extraordinary. Moreover, if, as might be reasonably argued, the literacy rate in 1910 was actually "only" 50 percent that is still a staggering figure.⁴¹ As Higgs remarked:

But even if the true literacy figure a half century after emancipation reached only 50 percent, the magnitude of the accomplishment is still striking, especially when one recalls the overwhelming obstacles blocking black educational efforts. For a large population to transform itself from virtually unlettered to more than half literate in 50 years ranks as an accomplishment seldom witnessed in human history.⁴²

The motivations that spurred the former slaves to almost instantaneously become the "people of the book" in their own right were both forward looking and immediately practical. The practical concern was to avoid being cheated; financial arrangements were often complex due to poverty and the seasons of agriculture. Share croppers would receive most of their pay at harvest and would frequently run up a tab at a local general store until that harvest came. Blacks who couldn't keep their own written records were in serious danger of being swindled.⁴³

Few were too young, and none too old, to make the attempt to learn. As fast as any kind of teachers could be secured, not only were day-schools filled,

⁴¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1960; Higgs, 1980.

⁴² Higgs, 1980, p. 120.

⁴³ Ibid.

but night-schools as well. The great ambition of the older people was to try to learn to read the Bible before they died. With this end in view men and women who were fifty or seventy-five years old would often be found in the night-school.⁴⁴

So, the worldly concern to avoid cheating, along with the hope of advancing and earning higher incomes combined with the lofty ambition of these sincere Christian folk to be able to read the Bible. It was an intoxicating mix.

During the whole of the Reconstruction period two ideas were constantly agitating in the minds of the coloured people... One of these was the craze for Greek and Latin learning ... There was a further feeling that a knowledge, however little, of the Greek and Latin languages would make one a very superior human being, something bordering almost on the supernatural. ---Booker T. Washington (Washington, 2012, 21).

Although Washington was poking a little fun at his people, how extraordinary it must have been to live in a time when learning Greek, the language of the Bible's New Testament, or Latin, the language of the educated, was a huge cultural fad! Imagine a teenager pleading, "Oh, Mom can't you get me a Greek tutor—all the cool kids know Greek! How else can I really understand the Bible?" How touching, also, that a people, previously denied education by government law, thirsted so strongly for knowledge that they could almost believe that speaking a few words of Greek or Latin would grant magical powers.

The relentless determination to become educated animated the newly free of all ages. Wilbert Jenkins details a case in Charleston shortly after the war where a private black school in financial distress was forced to shut down. Though this was explained to students, for a few days after the closing many

⁴⁴ Washington, 2012, p 21.

students still walked the several miles to the school each day in hopes that, somehow, a teacher would be found to teach them. However, few schools closed; destitute families somehow came up with funds for education. Students would do without shoes so they could buy needed books. Advanced students would quickly begin to teach others, including their parents and other adults. Displays of knowledge, basically education recitals, were celebrated. Schools would conduct festive public examinations where crowds of adults would attend and cheer with wild enthusiasm and pride as children wowed the audience with spelling, arithmetic and other knowledge.⁴⁵

The heroic Christian missionaries, mostly women, who came down from the North to teach these enthusiastic people were also a key part of this story, as was the philanthropy that helped finance the effort. Themes we will return to shortly.

Christian Faith, in the Best Sense, Sustained the Newly Freed

Today, many critics suppose, perhaps, that Christianity is all about strict and intolerant moral codes. But, the essential message of Christianity is forgiveness of sin, and grace.⁴⁶ Jesus also said all of the commandments boil

⁴⁵ Jenkins, 2003.

⁴⁶ For an outstanding example of grace-centered Christianity see the sermons of Dr. Eric Mason, co-founder and lead pastor of Epiphany Fellowship in Philadelphia, PA. His sermons are available at <https://epiphanyfellowship.org/>. See also the sermons of Jeff Eckert, pastor at Gracelife Beachside in Ormond Beach, Fla, available at <https://www.gracelifebeach.com/> and Pastor Leonce Crump, <https://renovationchurch.com/>, author of *Renovate: Changing Who You Are by Loving Where You Are* (Crump, 2016.)

down to this: “Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.”⁴⁷ Moreover, Jesus even said, “Love your enemies.”⁴⁸ Incredibly, the newly freed generally did exactly that. No doubt, some former slaves were, understandably, full of bitterness and hate for their former masters. However, the general spirit of these people was marked more by overwhelming joy at being free combined with a heart full of forgiveness. The Civil War hero Robert Smalls provides a striking example. Smalls, who later served ten years in the U.S. Congress, eventually became the owner of the plantation where he had been enslaved. He learned that the family of his former owner had become destitute, and took them in.⁴⁹ The newly free were looking forward with excitement and hope, somehow mostly immune from the human tendency to look backward with bitterness and resentment. Even before emancipation, slaves mostly maintained a commitment to living by Christian principles that manifested a steadfast spirit of forgiveness.⁵⁰

On the other hand, one might argue that these soft-hearted former slaves were in the lasting grip of the “Stockholm Syndrome,” where victims begin to identify with and bond with their kidnapers. However, the evidence does not seem to support that, at least to any significant extent. For example, though it happened some, it was quite unusual for former slaves to keep working for their former owners. The newly freed were very mobile, not often leaving the

⁴⁷ Mark 12:30-31, New International Version (NIV) Bible.

⁴⁸ Mathew 5:44, NIV.

⁴⁹ Lineberry, 2017.

⁵⁰ Washington, 2012; Holden, 2016. It is difficult to comprehend the extraordinary forgiving spirit of the former slaves. We will return to possible explanations throughout this narrative, especially in Chapter Four. The newly free would have insisted that their forgiving nature had a supernatural basis that surpasses all human understanding. To anyone open to this possibility, this may be a plausible explanation.

South, but assertively moving from the farms to the cities or on to different farms. Any irrational loyalty to former captors was certainly not widespread.⁵¹

Another possibility is that, at least sometimes, the display of gracious forgiveness was an act. It would certainly be understandable if the freed slaves had felt extremely resentful. But, for any who did, nothing good would come from a former slave revealing they were full of bitterness and longing for vengeance. In fact, this might well trigger business repercussions or even violence against them. However, it seems unlikely that tremendous numbers of the newly freed could have had the acting ability of Academy-Award winning actors.

Another strong indicator that forgiveness was sincere is the fact that there was so little violence initiated by blacks against whites. Of course, blacks were outnumbered and greatly outgunned; it would have been unwise for the newly freed to provoke racists who were already prone to viciousness. However, throughout history we have seen that strong incentives against violence are often not enough to prevent it. People, especially young males, whatever their race, often exhibit more passion than good sense when they are enraged. Mindless attacks that end up doing greater harm to those doing the attacking have not been historically rare. At the turn of the century the lynching of a black person somewhere in the U.S. was not happening every day or even every week, but was not so rare either. Yet, retaliation seldom occurred. It does seem the Christian culture of forgiveness so permeated the black community that it generally restrained even immature males who are, when provoked, prone to be driven more by rage than reason.

⁵¹ Higgs, 1980, Washington, 2012.

Also, embittered people dwelling on the past are not often known to be highly productive. It seems impossible that the former slaves would have been such incredible overachievers if many of them were resentful people obsessed with the past. Overachievers are more often positive thinkers who shrug off problems, not people pretending to be positive but secretly seething.

The positive outlook of these remarkable people showed in their continued faith in the ideals of the United States. There were, naturally, a few exceptions but they were generally great patriots. One might expect, looking through the lens of common current attitudes, that there would have been widespread bitterness, perhaps some sarcasm directed at the Declaration of Independence with its lofty rhetoric from white men promoting “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” in a nation acknowledging that “all men are created equal.” Instead, the Fourth of July was always enthusiastically celebrated by the newly free. They resisted all temptation to “throw out the baby with the bath water.” They forgave America its sins and celebrated the ideals at which we were aiming.⁵² W.E.B. Du Bois summarized:

Few men ever worshiped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries.⁵³

Their commitment to Christianity reflected this same determination to remain devoted to ideals, despite the harm done to them as slaves by the whites who so often grossly failed to live by the Christian principles they espoused.⁵⁴

⁵² Jenkins, 2003, Hannah-Jones, 2019.

⁵³ Hannah-Jones, 2019, p. 20.

⁵⁴ Although many tried to argue that the Bible endorsed slavery this is absurd. Slavery was clearly against Christian principles, perhaps most directly spelled out in the Apostle Paul’s letter in support of releasing a man from slavery, found in the New Testament book of *Philemon*. See

Again, it would seem more consistent with human nature for the former slaves to abandon a faith that failed to open the eyes of most whites to the sin of slavery. Instead, it was in their nature to seize on the good in Christianity, rather than dwell on the human failures of so many white pseudo-Christians. No doubt this was facilitated by the fact that Southern abolitionists, like their brethren in the North, were virtually always devout Christians. Other Southerners who did not go quite so far as to openly espouse abolition, but were often very kind and helpful to slaves, and later to the newly freed, were also fervent Christians.⁵⁵ Again, the former slaves saw the hypocrisy, but refused to reject the ideals they loved merely because hypocrites did not properly uphold them. Frederick Douglass spoke for most of his race when he wrote:

I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity...”⁵⁶

From their viewpoint, the newly free had seen enough of a Christian remnant, white people who were truly living more Christ-like lives, to facilitate their faith. Understandably, however, the newly free did generally break away from white churches and establish their own congregations with their own pastors. Sometimes white churches strove to make the newly free welcome, persuading them to stay, but helping them if they did go. Sadly, it was probably more often true that the white members were happy to see them go out on their own.⁵⁷

also 1 Timothy 1:10.

⁵⁵ Degler, 2000.

⁵⁶ Douglass, 2017, p. 42.

⁵⁷ Jenkins, 2003.

Christian churches were the heart and soul of black society.⁵⁸ Often, on Sundays the entire day would be spent at church, along with extensive services on Wednesdays. Whatever social activities they could find time for centered around the church, such as Sunday baseball games and picnics. But congregations were serious about exhorting each other to live godly lives, particularly as regards marriage. For example, it was common for exposed adulterers, if they did not repent and change their ways, to ultimately be expelled from the church and shunned by the community.⁵⁹

It seems this spiritual foundation sustained them, apparently helping them to forgive the horrible sins against them, and imbue them with an “I can do all things through Christ” sort of spirit that gave them phenomenal endurance. In following the command to “love their neighbors as themselves,” they helped each other even when each of them did not have enough for their own needs, as in the case of those coins given to send their “grandson,” Booker T. Washington, off to school. The examples of poor blacks helping others, especially in funding education, detailed in Washington’s *Up from Slavery* are too numerous to list. But let us squeeze in one more here. In the early days of the Tuskegee Institute an elderly black lady dressed in rags hobbled into his office anxious to help the students. She was penniless but donated six eggs, saying, “I wants you to put dese six eggs into the eddication of dese boys an’

⁵⁸ Building their own churches was a challenge. Initially, they often used facilities at white churches, adjusting their worship times so that one building could support two separate congregations. But building their own churches was a high priority, and was eventually accomplished, often with assistance from Northern churches.

⁵⁹ Jenkins, 2003. There was, as mentioned earlier, a significant problem with corruption in many of the new black preachers. But when corrupt pastors were found out they were simply fired and a new pastor hired. Again the failure of people, even pastors, to live up to ideals caused no loss of faith, no abandonment of their own ideals, for these ever faithful people,

gals."⁶⁰

Marxists have commonly criticized religion as an “opiate of the poor.” However, for the newly freed, Christianity seemed to be more a supernatural high energy drink than an opiate! Their faith turned out to be a lasting faith, passed on to succeeding generations. The same faith that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would later draw on for his own strength as well as that of many of his supporters, as major steps toward equal protection under the law were taken at last in the 1960s.

Overcoming Corrupt Government

Thus far, we have established that the freed slaves were generally an extraordinarily hardworking, intrepid and virtuous people. But, how did this translate to overcoming the staggering obstacles they faced? In particular, how did they get past a deeply bigoted, flawed government when they didn’t always even have reliable voting rights? The answer is that they made maximum use of the one clear freedom they had—the freedom to move. These determined people simply “voted with their feet,” meaning they relentlessly moved on to greener pastures whenever they were seriously mistreated. Though they did not, until about 1915, begin to move out of the South in large numbers, they did move from rural areas to cities, or from one farm to another in very large numbers.⁶¹

Economists and political scientists have long recognized that this “foot voting” is a substantial check on government abuse, often more effective than actual voting.⁶² Even if blacks had enjoyed full voting rights at the time, they

⁶⁰ Washington, 2012, p. 94.

⁶¹ Du Bois, 1908; Higgs, 1980.

⁶² Tiebout 1956; Downs, 1957; Ilya, 2018.

would often have been critically outnumbered by a white majority. But, any lone black family could singlehandedly escape the clutches of any evil government, in a sense, “fire” everyone in an offending local or state government by moving to a better jurisdiction. Thus, foot voting plus the influence of a minority of whites who were virtuous in this regard, restrained government abuse. Not nearly enough to make the government just, but enough to significantly limit injustice.

Two pieces of evidence firmly establish the veracity of this. One, is the simple fact, explained earlier, that so relatively few of the newly freed left the South, and many who did later returned. Had government abuses been consistently severe and widespread this would not have been the case. Secondly, despicable acts of violence against blacks, such as from the Ku Klux Klan or the “whitecaps” were sometimes very brazen, but were often conducted by villains acting in the dark of night, who sometimes even wore hoods to conceal their identities. Clearly, they did not always feel completely immune from criminal prosecution. In fact, Southern judges were often remarkably, relatively fair to blacks even in slave times.⁶³

Moreover, the tactic of violent intimidation clearly tended to backfire. In the cases where the whitecaps tried to terrorize independent black farmers to leave their own farms and come back to work on the plantations the strategy was an utter failure. If the threat was bad enough, rather than deigning to work for terrorists, the newly free sensibly left town altogether! Whenever black workers abandoned a given plantation or general region, this left plantation

⁶³ For example, kidnapping free Northern blacks and then selling them as slaves was a horrible but common practice in the decades before the war. Judges consistently ruled in favor of those captives who managed to communicate their plight to the courts, Huebner, 2009.

owners in a quandary, having to pay wage premiums to quickly gather enough workers to keep up with the rhythms of farming, especially at crucial harvesting or planting times. The vicious, moronic practice of attempting to use terrorism as a recruiting tool slowly faded away rather than successfully sweeping through the South. Thus, farm owners were forced to abandon intimidation, and work to make themselves attractive employers to the newly freed.⁶⁴ Part of that meant that plantation owners or other wealthy farmers, who were likely in a strong position to influence government, had strong incentive to make sure blacks would be reasonably safe in their area. Poor whites were usually the villains behind lynching.⁶⁵ This would have been an even worse epidemic if not for the countervailing economic interests of plantation owners forced to recruit the newly free.

One lynching is too many, but it seems foot voting helped prevent this sort of terrorism from becoming more common. Overall, it was clearly safer for the newly free to live in the rural South rather than the urban North, as reflected in comparative lifespans, the small exodus from the South, and the frequent return of many former slaves who did leave. Returning to the NAACP figures cited earlier, although almost three times as many blacks (3,446) were lynched as whites (1,297) this terrorism against blacks was still relatively infrequent, averaging 40 deaths per year in the entire country from 1882 to 1968. Of course, that 40 per year was still horrifying and the newly free were not complacent about the danger and huge injustice.

However, they saw the entire fallen world for the unjust, dangerous place it was in those days. Sustained by an unshakable faith, they could not be

⁶⁴ Higgs, 1980.

⁶⁵ Norrell, 2009.

unnerved or frightened by much of anything. Though the threat of lynching or other nonlethal, lawless violence was probably more psychologically frightening than, say, the far greater threat posed by deadly disease, these were not a people much susceptible to being “psyched out.” In a low-tech time full of danger from epidemics, floods, blizzards and other hazards of nature these courageous men and women obviously viewed lynching as the low statistical risk it was and acted accordingly. They refused to leave the South not because they were foolish, but because they were realistic and brave. We might say the newly free refused to panic, refused to let the terrorists win. Perhaps, a lesson for us today.

Overcoming bias in labor and consumer markets

The newly free marketed themselves shrewdly and aggressively. Since this often involved a ready willingness to pick up and move, we could say they “bargained with their feet” just as assertively as they voted with their feet.

Robert Higgs documents this example from 1865 Texas:

The old line planters, who only a few weeks before had driven off their negroes, endeavored to secure their services by offering greater inducements. They offered part of the crop -- first, one-fourth, then one-third, and now one-half rather than let their plantations remain idle.⁶⁶

In what is likely a surprising fact to many, equal pay for equal work quickly became the norm in the South, especially in agriculture, despite pervasive prejudice. This occurred because desire for profit, which always conflicts with employer bias, was even stronger than the desire to discriminate. While white farm owners did indeed generally desire to pay blacks as little as

⁶⁶ Lightfoot, 1869; Higgs, 1980.

possible, they simply refused to pay white laborers more!⁶⁷

To clarify the logic of this, consider the hypothetical case where wages are initially very unequal. Suppose white farm workers are paid 70 cents a day while black workers get only 50 cents for equally productive work. The conflict with profit in this situation is that whites are paid much more yet are no more productive, essentially receiving a huge, unearned bonus, charity from the farm owners.⁶⁸ Every time a plantation owner hires a white for 70 cents he must pay an extra 20 cents a day for the privilege of satisfying his taste for discrimination. If he wants to maximize profit then he will abandon hiring whites and hire only the markedly cheaper blacks. If maximization of profit is fairly widely spread (it need not be universal) among plantation owners, then demand for white workers will collapse, while the demand for black workers surges. Collapsing demand reduces wages for whites while surging demand raises blacks' earnings, pushing the wages toward equality. As long as black workers are even a fraction cheaper, all those obsessed with profits will hire only blacks, raising demand and bidding up wages, and completely avoid whites reducing demand and depressing their wages. This drives the wages to equality.⁶⁹ The farmers did not at all set out to establish pay equity; they were

⁶⁷ U.S. Industrial Commission, Report, 1901 in Higgs, 1980.

⁶⁸ There is frequently some confusion on this point. People seem often to imagine that the impact of strong racism is simply to depress wages for racism's victims while leaving the wages of whites unaffected. In reality, in any labor market it is impossible to have one group's wages too low while the other's is just right. Either wages are "correct" for both groups or, if one is too low then the other must be too high. Racism simultaneously pushes the wages of whites too high as it unfairly depresses wages for minorities. Likewise for men and women when there is strong gender bias.

⁶⁹ Since businesses today seem generally, almost universally, obsessed with profit one might wonder why this process does not naturally cause equal pay for equal work to emerge for women and minorities everywhere. We'll discuss some complications that prevented equal pay from

just rejecting overpriced labor and seeking out cheaper labor for their own gain, but in the process there was no way to avoid the end result of pay equality.

R. J. Redding was the Director of the Georgia Agricultural Experiment Station shortly after the war. He managed a number of farms, and though he expressed a preference for hiring whites he, like virtually everyone else, refused to pay them at a higher rate. When a white applied for work Redding would inform the man he could have the first available opening, provided he was willing to work for the going rate of 60 cents a day. He explained simply, “We cannot afford to pay you anymore, because I can get a negro for 60 cents a day.”⁷⁰ Their desire to discriminate was overcome by their desire for profit. Why pay anything above 60 cents when a black worker would do the job well for that pay?⁷¹

A similar logic generally drove home rental rates to equality for blacks and whites. Often, of course, a cabin was part of the compensation received by share croppers, so equal pay inherently involved equal housing treatment. If conventional landlords were involved they generally refused to rent to a white family if they could charge a black family more. The same exact process that produced wage equality also produced equal rental charges. Landlords’

emerging in the North shortly, and various other complications in the next volume of this book series.

⁷⁰ U.S. Industrial Commission, Report, 1901; Higgs, 1980, p 66.

⁷¹ Although equal pay was the norm in the agricultural South there were at least occasional exceptions in industry. Higgs documented one example at the Southern Railway (Higgs, 1980). This may be a reflection of Southern Railway enjoying unusually strong profit and/or having an unusually high taste for discrimination. It could also reflect bias from coworkers or consumers that translated into higher costs and/or lower revenues being triggered by the hiring of a black worker. It does seem that whites more often objected to working indoors with black coworkers while working outdoors together was not so problematic.

aggressive pursuit of black renters drove down their rental rates, as the neglect of lower paying white tenants drove rents for them up; rents quickly equalized.⁷² (As the newly freed progressed and were able to buy land the same process drove land prices charged to black and white buyers to equality.) In rural areas where cabins were rented out there was often enough space between cabins that having black neighbors was not such an issue for whites. In areas with more congested housing there was more segregation, with separate white and black housing areas, but still generally equal rent for equal housing.⁷³

Along with equal pay and non-discriminatory rental rates, blacks also enjoyed equal credit terms, stemming from the same profit seeking practices that drove wages and rent prices to equality. No doubt it helped that credit mainly came from general stores which were numerous and in stiff competition with each other. However, it is likely that actual credit terms were sometimes higher than the contractual terms agreed to because illiterate blacks were sometimes cheated. Credit typically took the form of running up a long tab at the store until finally paying it off at harvest time.⁷⁴ Thus, it was virtually impossible to remember all charged items, only those capable of keeping their own written records could double check the store owner's figures. Still, it is unlikely that this cheating reached epidemic proportions because of the intense competition. Those blacks who couldn't keep records, but intuitively sensed

⁷² In some cases blacks did end up paying more, but this generally related to late fees being more common for blacks than whites since they were under more financial stress, especially in the times shortly after the war, Higgs, 1980; Washington, 2012.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ A key innovation that made credit more widely available for blacks and whites alike was a refinement in law so that a lien could be placed against crops, Higgs, 1980.

something wasn't right would switch to another store.⁷⁵ And, as we have seen, literacy rates were rising so the risk of being exposed by a literate black client, or a literate friend of that black client was significant.

Again, keep in mind, nondiscriminatory wages, prices, and credit terms commonly emerged because whites were not willing to sacrifice profits to satisfy their bias. This was probably facilitated by the fact that competition was intense and profits were especially hard to come by given the depressed state of the Southern economy after the war.

Overcoming the labor cartels

It is well documented that plantation owners tried to form local cartels to manipulate the wages of the newly freed. By labor cartel, we mean they teamed up to act as a single buyer of labor service, preventing the normal working of supply and demand in the market, enabling them to keep wages artificially low. Again, the willingness of the newly free to quickly relocate saved them, and they essentially crushed the cartels. The utter defeat and frustration felt by the land owners' would-be cartel was evident, as one reported, "If [a freedman] promises to accept your proposition and live with [and work for] you, you may well doubt the fulfilment of his promise; for, while on his way to one place, he will accept a seemingly fairer offer and go elsewhere."⁷⁶

It seems the newly freed were quite crafty about this. Aware that harsh

⁷⁵ This is actually shrewd behavior in the face of uncertainty. This aggressive switching to a new general store/creditor, when they vaguely suspected cheating but weren't sure, was effective in pressuring store owners to be honest. From the viewpoint of the newly freed, leaving an honest store caused no great harm so why not drive home the message that you will not hesitate to take your business elsewhere if you sense unfairness?

⁷⁶ Higgs, 1980, p 49.

bargaining was not received well by these white owners, and might even lead to some sort of trumped up criminal charge, they often simply moved on quietly to fairer employers. So plantation owners who paid their black workers a fair market wage had no trouble attracting and maintaining their workforce. Those who didn't risked disaster, a shortage of workers, especially at critical planting or harvesting times. It didn't take too long for these white farmers to realize it was in their own self-interest to treat black workers reasonably well, with the same pay they offered their white workers.⁷⁷

In practice, the newly freed seemed not to have been troubled at all by resentful plantation owners tracking them down to their new locations and using violence or legal tricks against them. This makes sense since any attempt to exact vengeance on relocated blacks would have pitted those inclined to be vengeful against the new employers of the newly freed. One group of plantation owners versus another would have been a more level playing field, and both groups did have equal protection under the law. Victory would not have been easy or assured in such a conflict, so it seems the battle was simply never fought. In many ways, the conditions of the newly freed initially seemed little improved from their situation as slaves. But, the fundamental freedom to leave an employer, to move on, to vote and bargain with their feet gave them surprisingly mighty and decisive power.

Another problem faced by any cartel is that each member of the cartel has tremendous incentive to cheat on the agreement. If one plantation owner paid just slightly above the cartel's standard wage, he could assure himself of acquiring plenty of needed farm hands and avoid the risk of missing any of

⁷⁷ Ibid.

nature's relentless farming deadlines. This happened regularly. Of course, once this process begins with one owner then others follow; it would end up working rather like an auction. In outbidding each other they drive the wage up to its competitive level. This was also a factor in the failure of the plantation labor cartels. In fact, cartels have little chance of working in any circumstance unless laws and the courts sponsor the cartel, harshly punishing anyone who violates the agreement, which did not happen in this case at all.⁷⁸

The Irrationality of Southern Voters

We have seen there was somewhat of a dichotomy between the horrible way blacks were treated in terms of voting rights and government policy versus the way they were treated in the market place. This stemmed from the newly freed assertively marketing themselves “with their feet” such that whites’ economic interests trumped their prejudice. In fact, though, there was a broader dichotomy—in the years after the war whites often voted in blatantly racist ways, but at the same time they often displayed far less harsh attitudes in private transactions with the newly free.

Denying, or at least inhibiting, blacks voting rights was wrong and unjust, but it was not irrational from the selfish viewpoint of Southern whites who wanted to keep all the political power to themselves. However, irrationality did emerge in that whites passed some laws that, as indicated by their own behavior, they really did not want to impose. Whites routinely violated the laws themselves and were happy to leave them unenforced! For example, after Reconstruction government regulations were routinely passed

⁷⁸ Ibid. For a fuller, non-technical discussion of government sponsored industry cartels, particularly in the case of the pre-Uber taxi industry see Tacker, 2019.

that required blacks to sit only in the back section of streetcars and whites only in the front, an example of what came to be known as “Jim Crow” laws.

In a strange sort of way such laws that legally coerce firms into segregation practices are an indicator of something positive—they imply that segregation would not naturally emerge without the brute force of government. That is, business owners did not reliably prefer segregation of customers and neither did enough of their consumers to force firms to segregate by “popular demand.” Prior to the laws people had generally just taken seats wherever they wanted and segregation was not an issue, except that private street cars had often imposed segregation of smokers, who were required to sit in the back. Under the new laws passed in the 1890s, railroads were generally required to have separate cars for blacks and whites.

Private street car and train operators fought the laws in court at every step and appeared to suffer no ill will at all from white passengers. The infamous Plessy versus Ferguson case was brought by private railroads attempting, in vain as it turned out, to get the Supreme Court to strike down the segregation laws so they could go back to the days when passengers sat where they pleased without assigned seating by politicians. For their court test case, the railroads partnered with a man who legally was considered a Negro, and therefore assigned to the black car, but who looked white, in hopes of demonstrating the silliness of a law that almost no one seemed to want. Alas, the court decided the case neither fairly nor rationally. The railroads lost, the Supreme Court upheld segregated seating, and Jim Crow laws in general.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Sowell, 2019.

After the racial segregation laws were passed private companies, and their passengers generally ignored them completely, apparently without complaint from anyone. It seems likely that just one complainant who followed through and brought a lawsuit could have triggered enforcement. That no one seemed to bother for so long is very telling. Jennifer Roback provides detailed accounts of several examples, including a case in Georgia, where such a law was passed in 1891, and was then utterly ignored until at least 1898.⁸⁰

Frequently, after mandated segregation was finally enforced, black entrepreneurs started separate streetcar services for black riders who boycotted the streetcars operated by whites after segregation began to finally be enforced. In Houston the white-owned street car operators went on strike, leading to some good humored ribbing from the black drivers who continued working). Roback drew this amusing and revealing excerpt from the *Houston Daily Post*, June 3, 1904:⁸¹

An amusing feature ... was the frequent passing of the crude omnibus lines of the negroes constantly used by them in their boycott against the street railway company, on since the beginning of the enforcement of the separate compartment ordinance in October last. The dusky-hued occupants of these certainly had the laugh on the "po' white trash" and in some instances the whites were hurrahed good-naturedly by acquaintances among the blacks. One well known businessman tells this on himself. "I live away out in the South End and having neither horse nor carriage was forced to foot it to town. A conveyance came along driven by a negro and I asked him for a lift. "Looking at me and grinning, he said, 'Boss, Ise bliged ter fuse yer de faver. De city council won't let de white folks and de black folks ride together and I ain't got my compartment sign up yet,' and with that he drove on." (In more modern parlance, "Boss, I'm

⁸⁰ Roback, 1986. Although records are sketchy, some streetcars were government operated and presumably these did follow government law.

⁸¹ Ibid.

obliged to refuse you the favor. The city council won't let the white folks and the black folks ride together, and I don't have my compartment signs up yet.") The negroes seemed to enjoy the predicament of the whites hugely and along toward noon many of their conveyances could be seen driving about the streets with a space in the rear some two feet in length blocked off by a piece of cardboard bearing the legend, "For Whites Only."

As in Georgia and many other places, it seems whites in Texas were happy to ignore segregation laws, and inconvenienced when they were finally enforced. This account in the Houston paper clearly implies the street car segregation laws were something to be joked about, not a sensitive subject to be taken seriously.⁸² There were logical reasons to ridicule and ignore such laws. For railroads, replacing a single car on some routes with two separate cars, each only half full or less would greatly increase expenses, and, of course, prices for passengers. On streetcars and trains whites were as likely to be inconvenienced as blacks, sometimes having to crowd into the white section while there were plenty of empty seats in the "black" section. Some passengers still wanted to smoke, which bothered others, so segregation according to smoker status made sense and was continued.⁸³

⁸² Of course, many other Jim Crow laws were more malicious, and enthusiastically embraced. Labor regulations were especially problematic, and, as we will see, there are still Jim Crow type regulations in today's labor markets.

⁸³ Ibid. It is not clear why laws that had been ignored for years were suddenly sometimes enforced. In Georgia it seems a sensational crime, where a black passenger shot and killed a white as the two scuffled over a seat, was the lynchpin. Perhaps, similar incidents ignited other enforcements. When laws were enforced they seemed to be generally despised by black and white alike. In fact, train conductors and streetcar drivers, when coerced into establishing segregation had frequent conflict with white passengers who refused to obey. There was also sometimes comical confusion in how to handle lighter skinned "blacks" who would sometimes be forced to sit in the white section and other times in the black, Washington, 2012.

But the question is not why were bad laws often ignored, but rather, why were they passed in the first place? White consumers clearly did not want a law that white voters supported, but these are the same people! So, why did so many people, when “wearing their consumer hat” behave reasonably yet when wearing their “voter hat” act so hatefully and irrationally? Why did Southern whites often seem to go a little crazy when they stepped in the voting booth?

It turns out there are reasons for unusual viciousness to emerge in voting and political attitudes; this happens often and is a dangerous tendency in voters everywhere. We might call this the dark side of democracy. And democracy was seldom darker than in the South in the years after the war.⁸⁴

The Basic Economics of Voting

“Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.”
— Winston Churchill

The root problem is that the probability of one voter affecting an election outcome is generally not significantly greater than zero. As political scientist Russell Hardin phrased it, the value of being able to cast a single vote in a typical election “is roughly as valuable as having the liberty to cast a vote on whether the sun will rise tomorrow.”⁸⁵ We each have a moral responsibility, a civic duty to become a well-informed voter, but it takes an awful lot of time to study all relevant issues and analyze how one should vote. Thus, the cost of being well-informed is exorbitant in terms of our precious time. But, there

⁸⁴ Jim Crow laws were not always unpopular with whites, but were consistently costly to both firms and white consumers, though they could benefit white workers if the regulations inhibited black employment.

⁸⁵ Somin, 2018, p. 1655.

will almost certainly be no tangible benefit, merely a pleasant sense of having properly fulfilled one's civic duty. It's virtually certain that your vote will not result in your candidate winning by one vote.⁸⁶

The high cost of being well-informed combined with a small, mainly symbolic, benefit results in what economists have come to refer to as *rational political ignorance*.⁸⁷ Voters are almost universally uninformed or misinformed because there is no good personal incentive to be well-informed. For example, in the U.S. congressional elections in 2014 our two main parties fought for control of Congress in a year when there seemed to be more excitement about and interest in midterm elections than usual. Yet, the vast majority of voters, 62%, did not even know which party controlled Congress going in to the election!⁸⁸

Collectively, voters drive the system, but each individual likely has no impact and is therefore tuned out. Of course, the collective vote is nothing more than the sum of individual votes; democracy is driven by tuned out masses.⁸⁹ But, alas, that is not the worst of it. Logically, if, as demonstrated in 2014, we don't even know who is in power, let alone exactly what they are doing or should be doing, we voters should be humble, open-minded agnostics.

⁸⁶ Naturally, you could attempt to persuade other voters. However, it is still a longshot that one person can exert enough influence to impact election outcomes. Especially given the likelihood that most voters are not open-minded enough to be persuadable, as we will soon see.

⁸⁷ Downes, 1956.

⁸⁸ Somin, 2018.

⁸⁹ It is probably true that democratic nations are superior to alternatives because democracies, or more exactly, republics, are structured so that government is limited; voters are prevented from voting on many issues. For instance, the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution is intended to stop voters generally from having an opportunity to vote to restrict freedom of the press or freedom of religion.

Consider a group of people who know virtually nothing about quantum physics, but find it vaguely interesting, and end up mildly discussing it. They would not be screaming at each other or heatedly arguing. Political discussions, given our limited knowledge, should generally be of this same sort. We should be chuckling at our uncertainty and trying to help each other understand as best we can since most of us know so little.

Instead, voters are often rabidly opinionated, unjustifiably sure of ourselves, absolutely confident that anyone who disagrees with us politically must certainly be a fool or a villain.⁹⁰ We bear more resemblance to a true believer crusader or jihadist confronting infidels than humble agnostics, or fellow travelers trying to find our way in territory we don't well know. It seems politics and voting often brings out the worst in us, just as it did for those Jim Crow supporters back in the day. Since our one vote is not meaningful we often use that vote to satisfy whatever prejudice we have or emotions we feel, rather than try to analyze what our biases or unwise, knee-jerk emotional responses might be, and how we might overcome them. Voting for a politician or political party is rather like rooting for a sports team; there is likely no tangible down side to giving full rein to our unconsidered passions of the moment. We can love or hate as we wish. Casting our one vote is likely no more consequential than yelling angrily at the television during the game.

Brian Caplan has termed this situation “rational irrationality.”⁹¹ It is unfortunately rational for each voter to be closeminded, unwilling to hear out

⁹⁰ Possibly our hard-headedness in politics stems from a guilty conscience that we have not fulfilled our civic duty to become well-informed, and have seldom seriously examined any viewpoint opposed to our own. Perhaps we like to pretend that we are experts because we feel we should be. And what kind of expert does not have firm opinions in their area of expertise?

⁹¹ Caplan, 2007; Somin, 2018.

the other side since her one vote is only symbolic anyway.⁹² There is no consequence for a voter to vent his anger, prejudice or any other feeling at the ballot box since it's just one vote. But, with most voters behaving this same way the collective result can be completely irrational. In contrast, in a private transaction where I alone "vote" on what to do, if I follow my angry, prejudiced heart I can make a bad choice that actually hurts me. It does me no harm to, say, irrationally vote against a politician who would benefit me, merely because she's black, since my one vote won't defeat her. However, if I refuse to hire a black person who could help my business make a lot of money, then my irrationality costs me a great deal—motivating me to think twice before I indulge my foolish bias. Thus, I am more likely to be rational in my private life than in my "voting life." I am apt to be at my worst when I cast my ballot, sometimes even utterly irrational.

Returning to the South after the Civil War, bitter and prejudiced though they may have been, most whites were too rational to refuse beneficial private transactions with the newly freed. Later, they were even too rational to stand in the white section of the street car when seats were available near black people. Only in the voting booth could each one of them choose to let loose, leave rationality behind and give full vent to prejudice.⁹³ Even if some small inner voice whispered they were voting foolishly, they could ignore it and

⁹² The word "rational" in this context means simply acting in a way that is consistent with one's preferences. It is very harmful to society for so many of us voters to be uninformed and close-minded, and immoral by most standards. But it is not irrational, is not inconsistent with our preferences. The problem is that our preferences are not noble enough.

⁹³ Of course, they did not vote directly on issues, but rather voted for candidates. Sometimes an elected official can then perhaps protect us from ourselves. One way to do that at that time in the South would be to pass an irrational law to satisfy wild-eyed voters, but then not enforce it, which is exactly what often happened.

plunge ahead, since one vote wouldn't matter anyway. So, many an individual voted to "keep blacks in their place" though such laws were often harmful to whites as well.⁹⁴ Of course, what was harmless for each bigoted voter was quite harmful to all in its collective result. Transportation became more expensive and less convenient for all.

Conclusion

Not every former slave was a success. No doubt some suffered post-traumatic stress of the worst kind. A significant minority fell into problems with alcoholism, family abandonment and other pathologies that we would expect to sometimes see in a population that had endured such extreme mistreatment. But this was not the norm. Overall, these people overcame seemingly impassable obstacles, and were spectacular over-achievers.

We commonly speak of the Americans in the age group who overcame the Great Depression, and then defeated Hitler and his allies as "the greatest generation." But, there is another intrepid generation, or rather sub-generation, of Americans who are also worthy candidates for that greatest generation title. Given the obstacles arrayed against them, no achievements in history seem more impressive than those of the first generation of freed slaves. With every reason to be bitter, they emerged from bondage full of forgiveness. Families had every excuse to fall apart, but instead they were stable, even slightly more so than established white families. With ample reason to turn their back on a religion too often corrupted by racism instead they drew strength and inspiration from their Christian churches. These churches were often their education centers

⁹⁴ This is not to say that all such regulation, commonly known as Jim Crow laws, was always unpopular with white consumers. Such laws generally would harm white consumers somewhat, but if the damage is small, those with enough bias may consider it a price worth paying.

and always their social hubs. Lynching and other terrorist activities were a great concern, but did not panic the newly free or cause them to exaggerate the risk. Life expectancy and overall prospects for them remained higher in the South. They recognized this and could not be stampeded away. They pulled together, routinely exhibiting extraordinary selflessness, turning themselves into another “people of the book” almost overnight, with literacy zooming from almost zero to 50-70 percent by 1910. Through sheer hard work and savvy marketing their incomes surged, growing more than one third faster than those of whites.

Discrimination, especially from corrupt governments was painful, but not debilitating. By voting with their feet the newly freed evaded the worst governments and pressured the economic/political systems to restrain their worst impulses. That same mobility forced private markets to generally work as they ideally should. Plantation owners in need of labor were forced to attract black workers because these workers refused to be intimidated. Though many white Southerners were often unkind, some even vicious, they were economically rational. The newly freed generally earned equal pay because farm owners refused to pay whites more when blacks were equally productive. The former slaves paid the same rents because landlords refused to rent to whites at lower rates than they could charge blacks, likewise equal credit terms emerged.

White voters exhibited *rational political ignorance* and *rational irrationality*, as voters everywhere are prone to do, passing Jim Crow laws that they often did not support in private life. But, they remained rational in their private lives, choosing sensibly to sit near a black person on trains and streetcars when it was more comfortable than in the crowded white section. That is, until

politicians finally forced them to obey laws that had been irrationally supported by unthinking voters. Normal voting rights for the newly freed would not be fully attained until another distant day, though this did not hold them back as much as one might expect in their great education and economic accomplishments.

None of this is to say that their suffering was inconsequential or that lack of political rights was harmless. But, for this extraordinary generation of the newly liberated their great suffering was overshadowed by their even greater achievement.