

The emancipation problem in Maryland ... Brantz Mayer. Baltimore, 17th June, 1862.

THE EMANCIPATION PROBLEM IN MARYLAND

The following article, contributed originally to the Baltimore American, is republished with a few additional observations, at the request of gentlemen who desire its dissemination in pamphlet form.

BRANTZ MAYER.

Baltimore, 17 th June, 1862.

It is evident that the minds of many persons are becoming anxious in regard to slavery in our state. This fact is presented to us in several ways:—by the alleged insecurity of slave property wherever armies or large military forces from Northern States are kept active or in camp in its neighborhood; by direct and indirect discussions in the newspapers, in Congress, and in conversation; by the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia; but, chiefly, by the President's recommendation of emancipation with pecuniary aid from the United States. This emancipation,—gradual or rapid, —is virtually the abolition of involuntary servitude in Maryland, and the change of name cannot disguise the facts which may result from the accomplishment of that deed. It is proper that it should be investigated frankly from the beginning with all the light of statistical information; with entire fairness to both races that will be affected by it; and with due knowledge of their peculiar relations in Maryland.

Our domestic writers have long ago argued that this was a farming, manufacturing and commercial region; that we were in a transition state by the operation of *natural causes alone*; and that while our *plantations* were becoming exhausted under slave culture, the worn-out land in our temperate climate, subdivided among white farmers, under the skillful tillage of modern agricultural science, could quickly be restored to almost virginal fertility. While this of course, would add greatly to the value of our real estate, it was supposed by statesmen that the superior demand for negro labor in the cotton, sugar and rice states, and the healthful progress of colonization in Africa, would gradually free the soil of Maryland from its colored population without any of those violent changes which have often operated so disastrously by uprooting the relations of capital and labor. Indeed, it has long been evident to persons unconnected with political agitation, *that the slaves of Maryland were diminishing in numbers; that the free colored population was increasing to an alarming degree; that the free—contrary to the hopes of philanthropists— did not emigrate, but remained tenaciously in this state notwithstanding the inducement of absolute freedom in other states; and, finally, that the time was rapidly arriving when the Negro question, rather than the Slavery question or emancipation, would become of paramount importance in its bearing on labor and taxation in Maryland.*

Let us examine a table constructed from the census of 1860, just published by the United States Government, showing the movement in our population of Maryland from 1790 to 1860:

Census of the year. Slaves. Free. White. 1790 103,036 8,043 208,649 1800 105,635 19,587
216,326 1810 111,502 33,927 235,117 1820 107,397 39,730 260,223 1830 102,994 52,938
291,108 1840 89,737 62,078 318,204 1850 90,368 74,723 417,943 1860 87,188 83,718 516,128
that is on us now.

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From this authentic statement it will be seen that the Maryland slaves rose in numbers from the year 1790 to the year 1810, when they reached their culminating point of 111,502. In the census of 1820, *they fell* from that figure to 107,397; and have continued *diminishing* at every subsequent decade, except that of 1850, which gave the small *increase* of 631, an augmentation more than counterbalanced by the *great decrease* of 3,180, between 1850 and 1860. Meanwhile, however, *the increase of the free colored has been uninterrupted from 1790*, and ranges from 8,043 at that time to 83,718 now! The number of 83,718 *free colored* added to 87,188 slaves, gives the grand total of 170,906, *as the entire negro population with which Maryland statesmanship has to deal in considering the problem presented to us*. These large numerical results and ratios are generally unknown or disregarded by those who talk most confidently on the subject.

The question then, in Maryland, is not so much whether it is the material interest of the State to abolish slavery, as it is to know how to dispose of 170,906 people, and their increase since 1860. For the mere abolition of slavery—leaving the free and newly emancipated here—does not release the soil from their support, and deliver that soil, and all the labor of the State, with its remuneration, to the white race. Slavery abolished either by immediate or gradual emancipation, and the negroes continuing here, the unfortunate creatures would of course, merely change masters, and, instead of being the slaves of individuals, they would become the slaves of a social system, with which they would never be permitted to assimilate. The question, then, is of emancipation *and its results*, in a state in which the negro population is so vast that it is folly or wickedness to say that you may “leave results to take care of themselves.” If it is sought to rid this state, *by legislation*, of 170,906 laboring people, out of a total population (white and black) of 687,034, or one-fourth of its entire mass, (thus manifestly disturbing the relations of labor) statesmanship must begin to consider its responsibility to the whites who are already in our state, the owners of its property, the payers of its taxes, and interested in colored labor, as well as the prospective interests of the problematical whites, who, it is said are to pour into Maryland upon the exodus of the colored man. This, we assert, must be one of our earliest considerations, *if legislation* be forced to interfere; but if it be left to *natural* causes and to the *voluntary movement of those most interested, the census demonstrates that slavery is diminishing,*

and freedom increasing, and that, in truth, we are but greatly embarrassing ourselves when we attempt to add rapidly to the number of the emancipated, when we do not know how to get rid of the multitudes of free blacks already among us.

Maryland is more seriously concerned in this matter than any other State wherein the white race must ultimately become the sole laboring one. The Northern Free States have comparatively very little interest in it.

Let us present some more results from the census.

The six New England States—Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut—own between them 65,440 square miles of territory; and yet *in all of them*, in 1850 there were but 23,021 colored people, whose number had increased in 1860 to 24,140. Thus in ten years the six commonwealths had received an augmentation of but 1,120 blacks; while the little State of Maryland, with but 11,000 square miles, or about one-sixth of the territory of New England, had achieved the astonishing *gain*, notwithstanding its slave code, of 8,995 free colored people. In these ten years the decrease of slaves in Maryland has been 3,178; yet the increase of free colored people being 8,995, the consequent total increase of the race in our State, in that period, has reached the large sum of 5,815. Pennsylvania, possessing 46,215 square miles of soil, *has the largest free colored population of any of the free States*, numbering 56,373: and yet, with all her inducements of liberty, the free blacks of her conterminous neighbor Maryland, outnumber hers by the almost incredible amount of 27,345, on a territory not quite one-fourth of the size of Pennsylvania. Well may it be said that, emancipation adopted, no State needs so prompt an attention as does the State of Maryland to the startling social problems which must arise. It is precisely a question of *removal or of co-existence* with the liberated. If they will not remove voluntarily beyond the United States, the question of expulsion or of co-operation in labor with the whites must immediately arise. That the white man is ready for such co-operation and rivalry, is not very probable; and, if his humanity permit the negro to remain, he must begin to calculate on reduction of wages, or to compute the taxation which colored pauperism will inevitably produce.

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It will not do, therefore, to allow this question to be treated by political demagogues, or to approach it with subserviency to the behests of party leaders, or under the seductive promises of official power. Nevertheless at this period of civil war, a war which has one of its disturbing causes in the institution of slavery,—with nothing yet definite as to the principles or prospects of readjustment,—it has been thought proper by some persons to agitate the question of emancipation in Maryland. With most of these agitators everything is indefinite as to means, system and results. They content themselves with assertions. “The time has come,” “the institution is doomed;” “the interest of

Maryland is freedom;" and many other vague, exclamatory phrases satisfy them in their summary mode of dealing with objectors. But phrases will not appease the owners of thirty millions of dollars worth of property in Maryland, nor the multitudes of intelligent people whose interests and happiness are interlaced with theirs. In a slave State it is not the slave- *owner alone* who is interested in the institution. The limited number of this class is no criterion of the immense ramifications of the results of slave-labor throughout a slave State; and, accordingly, it is false to say or insinuate that because slave-owners are few in comparison to the bulk of population, the institution may be abolished without wounding the society with which it is interwoven.

At this time, an unquestionable y conservative President, evidently sincere in his resolution to preserve the Constitution and the Union under it, promulgates his views on the subject by means of a message to Congress. "The United States," he says, "ought to co-operate with any State which may adopt a *gradual* abolishment of slavery, giving to each State pecuniary aid, to be used by such State at its discretion, to compensate for the inconvenience, public and private, produced by such a change of system."

This is the excellent *sentiment* of the President of the United States,—a *sentiment* to be made effective, doubtless, in a discreet manner, at a proper time, but not in haste. It is assumed to be his "policy" by many politicians; and, while it leaves all legislation concerning slavery where it belongs under the law, to the States, *initiates the idea* of compensation by the General Government. That "*sentiment*" was passed by both Houses of Congress, as a "*Resolution*," of large majorities in each. Yet, "*Resolution*" of Congress, as it now is— *for all practical human purposes, it is nothing but a "sentiment" still*. It is not a *law*, effective for anything but as a *declaration of opinion* by the present members of an incomplete Congress. It is a Congress in which most of the States, possessing the property to be acted on, are not represented. It proclaims no system by which the sentiment is to become operative. It appropriates no money. It is subject to repeal at any moment. *It affixes no quantum of valuation. It has no adhesion of opinion in the Free States by the test of subsequent elections*. It is considered by many of doubtful constitutionality, even if it had appropriated money for the purpose of compensation; and, by others, it is held to be doubtful (even if accepted by the Slave States) whether the Free States would submit to taxation for emancipated Slaves. Nay, it has been considered an excellent gag for abolition, which would become less venomous and active when it found it had to pay for agitation. "I voted," said that able statesman, Mr. Thomas of Massachusetts in Congress—"for the resolution recommended by the President for aid to the States in the gradual work of emancipation, *though I could not fail to see that it was on the verge of authority, and must, perhaps, finally rest like the purchase of Louisiana, upon general consent!*"

Can such a "resolution," lacking all the practical elements of money, system, or definite and unalterable law, be properly considered an adopted *National policy relating to slavery, so as to become a basis for the action of statesmen in Maryland, in the midst of war?* We do not ask the question of politicians. *Absolute legislation* even, in revolutionary times, is a poor reliance when one undertakes to affect organic institutions and to deal summarily with one quarter of the population of a State and the material interests of the whole. In truth, it is nothing else but the inauguration of a great social revolution of labor and representation, in the midst of a political rebellion. Nor will it do to respond that we must have confidence. "Confidence is a plant of slow growth," especially in seasons like the present. "Confidence," said Burke, "may become a vice, and jealousy a virtue, according to circumstances." Confidence in what? In the release of 87,188 slaves, when you have already in Maryland 83,718 free, and have no means or place provided for their prompt and humane exodus, while it is conceded that this very exodus is the indispensable thing.

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What is to be the mode of the exodus, and whither? Africa? How few, alas! have accepted, in thirty years, the proffers of our Colonization Society and the liberal expenditure of our State! Are they to be sent North? The North will not have them to support as paupers, or *to enter into competition with its own white labor*; and, accordingly, it guards its soil by hostile legislation against the entrance of the free colored man. Are they to be sent South? The South will tolerate no such immigration of free blacks, and permits no more manumission within its borders. The West is equally closed. *Everywhere the white man wants the soil for himself and his own labor, just as much as he wants Maryland for his toil and recompense, when freed of negroes!* What then? Denied all egress for our 170,000 freed-men are they to be caged in Maryland, to *compete there with white labor*; to become demoralized and destroyed; to become a tax on us for support; and, at last, to be "extinguished in the conflict with a superior race,"—in the flippant language in which it is fashionable for fanaticism to conceal its cruelty and to dispose of a solemn question?

We are in the midst of war. It is true that the signs are quite auspicious for its speedy end. The burdens, the anxieties, the manifold tasks and duties of that war, in its true and single purpose of restoring the Union under the Constitution, are enough for us at present. We have no right to divert that war from its direct purpose into no *indirect* one for emancipation. Every effort of that kind, open or disguised, should be resisted. Maryland has suffered by the storm, yet, like a gallant vessel in a gale, moored near a Ice shore, she has hitherto clung securely to her anchorage. The ship is still staunch. She has sprung no leak. *There is no need yet to throw any part of the cargo overboard.* Is it the part of a good seamanship at such a moment to cut the cables and commit the bark of State to her thin sails and the mercy of the neighboring breakers?

The object of this article is not to excite party opposition to emancipation, but to display some of the perils which threaten society and the solution of the question, if adopted as “a policy” by any party at the present time, *in a State already over-burdened with free colored people*. We belong to that class which holds, (as the Census table proves), that slavery is in a way of gradual extinguishment in Maryland, and that if it come too fast, and without provision for the freed, they will be hemmed in by a wall of hostile liberty at the North, and of equally hostile slavery at the South. Our difficulty is that of numbers of human beings who are not to be dealt with like cattle, but, as they have served us faithfully, are to be objects of our Christian care. But, with peace, the exodus of the slaves would be more rapid than hitherto; nor is it unlikely that the same event may hasten the voluntary departure to Africa of the free, under the stimulus of largely increased white immigration to our genial climate and inviting soil.

At all events, a period of civil war and national distress is not one for great organic changes, radically altering the relations of property, especially when that property is already taxed to its utmost strain in the hands of patriots. The President's proposition will not become stale by delay until the suppression of the rebellion, and when that shall have been put down, those directly interested in this species of property should *first* be heard from and listened to. If emancipation be adopted *then*, it must be effected gradually, as the interests of the slave as well as of his master clearly require. It is probably in this spirit that the Convention of the State of Missouri—while treating the Resolution of Congress based on the President's proposition with the courtesy due to the high source whence it emanated—has thought proper to lay it on the table, and to adjourn for a year. Doubtless, after peace shall be proclaimed, our ensuing Legislature will consider the propriety of calling a convention, and by that time the people may have sufficiently recovered from the shock of arms to judge calmly of their interests. That judgment will formed independently, as becomes freemen, without extrinsic influences either of compulsion or seduction. By that time, too, the fortune of war may have changed our interests so materially that those who are most reluctant for emancipation now may be most eager then. Probably all may agree that it is not so much emancipation which is to be feared in Maryland as the emancipated.

B. M.

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