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Slavery in Present West Virginia in 1860

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One hundred years ago slavery was not an uncommon thing in what is now the state of West Virginia. Let yourself drift back through time, past the turn of the century and on back to the year 1863 when West Virginia became a state. Now go back just a little further.

The year is 1860! We are in Jefferson County. It is mid- October and the apple crop is ready for picking. The owners of the large orchards are the masters of the slaves who are used throughout the area to pick the apples.

Jefferson County is the site of John Brown's famous raid. Just one year ago he attacked the United States arsenal in an attempt to free the slaves. His band was composed of Abolitionists and slaves. Although their motive was admirable, their procedure was not right. They wanted to free the slaves, but as we view the area on the first anniversary of the raid, we see that nothing has changed. Slavery still reigns.

Now let us take a quick look around the western part of Virginia. We find slaves in most of the counties, although only a few have large numbers. If we actually take stock of the number of slaves in western Virginia we will find that there are fewer here than in the other slave areas. Jefferson County has the greatest number. The slaves account for twenty per- cent of its population.¹ In Kanawha County we find a great number of slaves. There are over two thousand and they are used in many jobs.¹ Their chief duties consist of working on the farms. They help clear land and cultivate the crops. In one-third of the counties the slaves account for only one per- cent of the population. The counties of Berkeley, Greenbrier, Hampshire, Hardy, and Monroe have over one thousand slaves each. Nevertheless, the number of slaves has actually decreased in the last decade. There are twelve thousand seven hundred seventy-one slaves and three hundred thirty-four thousand nine hundred twenty-one whites.²

As we travel around the state we hear much talk about the abolition of slavery. The western members of the General Assembly have been trying since 1832 to have slavery abolished in the entire state. The Assembly strongly considered this, but it has still not become a fact.

The Abolitionists are printing and circulating forceful literature. William E. Stevenson of Wood County was recently indicted for circulating a book he had written. This book declared "that the South must soon adopt a free labor economy."³ The famous Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune, is indicted in Harrison County because of certain statements appearing in his newspaper.

The Wheeling Intelligencer is printing propaganda material for the Abolitionists. An article by John Marshall recently appeared in that newspaper. He said: "It (slavery) is ruinous to the whites; it retards improvements, roots out our industrious population, banishes the yeomanry from the country, and deprives the spinner, the weaver, the smith, the shoemaker, and the carpenter of employment and support."⁴

Many of the people of western Virginia are basing their opposition to Negro slavery on the principles of the Declaration of Independence. James McDowell is one of these, he says: "You may place the slave where you please, you may dry up to the utmost the foundations of his feelings, the spring of his thought-you may close upon his mind the avenue of knowledge and cloud it over with artificial might-you may yoke him to your labor as an ox which liveth only to work and worketh only to live-you

may put him under any process, which, without destroying his value as a slave, will debase and crush him as a rational being-you may do this and the idea that he was born to be free will survive all. It is allied to his hope of immortality-it is the ethical part of his nature which oppression cannot reach-it is the torch lit up in his soul by the hand of Deity and never meant to be extinguished by the hand of man."5

There are many differences between the eastern and western parts of Virginia. Thomas Ritchie, editor of the *Richmond Enquirer*, has brought to light some of these. He said: "It is possible from what we learn that the committee on the colored population will report on some plan for getting rid of color. But is this all that can be done? Are we forever to suffer the greatest evil which can scourge our land, not only to remain but to increase within its domains? 'We may shut our eyes and avert our faces, if you please,' writes an eloquent South Carolinian; 'but there it is, the black and gnawing evil at our doors-and meet the question we must at no distant day.' God only knows what it is the part of wise men to do on that momentous and appalling subject. Of this I am sure, that the difference, nothing short of frightful, between all exists on one side of the Potomac and all on the other side, is owing to that cause alone. The disease is deep rooted-it is at the heart's core-it is consuming and has all along been consuming our vitals... something must be done."6

Even now many of the western Virginians are planning to withdraw from the state. They are holding secret meetings in Wellsburg and Wheeling. This is their cry: "Make western Virginia free, and she will invite immigrants. Her coal and her iron can be mined only by free labor. Negro slavery is wasteful everywhere, but less profitable in western Virginia than in any other part of the southern states."7 Slavery is wrong. These men are sure of this and intend to take some final move to abolish it. They will abolish it!!

Now let us come back to the present and view these events as @ the past. We now feel that John Brown was a hero. He made his raid one hundred years ago, yet every person in West Virginia is still familiar with his name. There is a monument at Harpers Ferry dedicated to his memory. All this just because there was slavery in western Virginia in 1860.

Today we praise the spirit of the men who were brave enough to speak against slavery. Their words are recorded in the volumes of history.

Yes, the counties that now compose West Virginia were slave-holding areas in 1860. But its citizens knew that slavery was wrong. One hundred years after all this history was made, we the present generation, can look back on our forefathers with pride.

Notes

1 Phil M. Conley, editor-in-chief, *The West Virginia Encyclopedia*, pp. 372-373.

2 James Morton Callahan. *The Semi-Centennial History of West Virginia*.

3 Conley, *The West Virginia Encyclopedia*, pp. 372-373.

4 *The Wheeling Intelligencer*, Nov. 28, 1859.

5 Charles H. Ambler, *A History of West Virginia*, pp. 230-231.

6 Ambler, *A History of West Virginia*, pp. 232-233.

7 Callahan, *Semi-Centennial History of West Virginia*.