

# The Economic Status of Negroes in Late Nineteenth Century Lancaster

by Thomas R. Winpenny

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Historians have spent considerable energy describing and analyzing the condition of the Negro in late nineteenth century America. While the quantity of work in this area has been impressive, it has also been limited in focus as attention has centered on the struggle to adjust to new agricultural patterns in the South<sup>1</sup> and the beginnings of black ghettos in the North.<sup>2</sup> This focus is understandable as both topics have broad appeal and are closely related. That is, the inability of the Negro to find an economically viable role in the agriculture of the New South in part explains the exodus which produced the black ghetto.

Given the attention paid to the rural South and the urban North, it seems fruitful to examine a third and decidedly different setting: the town. This study, therefore, asks: What was the economic status of Negroes in late<sup>3</sup> nineteenth century Lancaster, Pennsylvania? The selection of Lancaster as the setting for this study is best explained by the convenience of the writer as there is little reason to argue that the town was typical of most towns in America, the Middle Atlantic region, or even eastern Pennsylvania. Nevertheless, an analysis of what took place in Lancaster can provide a concrete example of what happened to one Negro community in one town.<sup>4</sup> The economic focus is desirable for two reasons: (1) it provides the best single indicator of the Negro's well-being, and (2) census, wage, and tax assessment data are conducive to reasonably precise analysis. Thus this study will attempt to determine the economic status of blacks in late nineteenth century Lancaster by examining such topics as employment, wages received, and property owned.

Lancaster, America's largest inland town, situated sixty miles west of Philadelphia, has traditionally served as a market for a rich agrarian hinterland. In addition, Lancaster has also had its share of industrial activity. As Frederic S. Klein has noted:

The census of 1880 showed the value of manufactured goods in Lan-

Pennsylvania, except Philadelphia, Reading, Scranton, and Pittsburgh. Leather, cotton goods, iron products of a hundred kinds, paper, wagons, steam engines, umbrellas, carriages, brick machines, forges, carpets, corks, cigars, and locks were among the many products manufactured in Lancaster.<sup>5</sup>

The Negro community, which constituted only slightly better than one percent of the total population in 1870, constituted roughly two percent in the 1880 and 1890 census. That is, by 1880 there were approximately 500 Negroes in a total population of 25,769. The residential pattern changed very little through the 1870, 1880, and 1890 census. Though Negroes lived in every one of the town's nine wards, they were clearly concentrated south of King Street (the major east-west artery), and in particular in the southeast quadrant or the Third and Seventh Wards. Specifically, in 1880, 78.3 percent lived south of King Street while 62.8 percent lived within the southeast quadrant. The Seventh Ward, within the southeast quadrant, alone housed 46.7 percent of the black community.<sup>7</sup> This concentration within the Seventh Ward endured through the nineteenth century.

Though the majority of Lancaster Negroes were born in Pennsylvania, several had Southern origins. For example, in 1880 some 51 of the 159 males in the labor force were born in the South. Forty-five of the Fifty-one were born in either Maryland or Virginia while only one was born in the deep South.<sup>8</sup> Since almost all Negroes in Virginia and roughly half of those in Maryland were slaves as late as 1860, it is reasonable to conclude that several members of the town's adult black population were born and partially raised in slavery. Does it logically follow that those with slave backgrounds were at a relative disadvantage and therefore not as well off as other Negroes in the same town? This is a question that will be considered.

To comment briefly on educational opportunity, it is interesting to note that while more than half of the blacks between the ages of five and sixteen were attending school, almost half were not.<sup>9</sup> Illiteracy among blacks was high though the 1880 census does not provide reliable information concerning just how high. A sample taken in Lancaster County during the 1900 census, however, revealed illiteracy rates of 2.2 percent for whites and 22.4 percent for blacks.<sup>10</sup> Surely the illiteracy rate was higher than 22.4 percent in 1880.

With this background it is now possible to turn to a consideration of employment which actually requires two separate and distinct considerations because of the wide gap separating male and female opportunity. Looking first at the Negro male labor force, it is clear that this group was quite young as 76.1 percent were thirty-nine or younger.<sup>11</sup> It is also clear that the male enjoyed far greater opportunity than the female. A frequency distribution for

Negro male employment taken from the 1880 census reveals the following:

Laborer	45	Hauler	5
Hod Carrier	22	Bootblack	5
Rolling Mill Worker	13	Porter	4
Barber	11	Peddler	3
Coachman	11	Minister	2
Servant	11	Blacksmith	2
Whitewasher	9	Hostler	2
Waiter	8	Miscellaneous	6

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What is interesting about this frequency distribution is not the fact that many blacks held menial positions, as that could be anticipated; but that better than ten percent held skilled positions<sup>13</sup> while almost as many held factory positions. Professionals, in contrast, were almost nonexistent as there was but one full-time minister while a second listed his occupation as minister-printer. As informative as this is, however, there are two interesting questions it does not answer: (1) What did the title "laborer" mean, and (2) Which of these men were entrepreneurs? For example, did a barber have his own shop, or did he work for someone?

W. E. B. DuBois in his study of the Philadelphia Negro made a distinction between "common" and a "select class" of laborers which separated more menial tasks from such jobs as hod carrier and teamster.<sup>14</sup> Since hod carriers and others in this "select class" listed their specific occupations, it is reasonable to assume that those who simply called themselves laborers were "common" laborers.

The existence of entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial spirit can be approximated with the help of city directories. The assumption here is that if a barber operated his own shop, his name would appear under the heading "Barbers" in the business directory usually found in the back of Lancaster city directories. A survey of the business directories uncovered thirteen black entrepreneurs. There were six whitewashers, four barbers, one cooper, one peddler, and one operator of an express service.<sup>15</sup> Thus in addition to those who were able to gain factory employment or skilled work, still others functioned as entrepreneurs. All of this suggests that several Negro males in 1880 were not excluded from the mainstream of Lancaster's economy.

An examination of the influence of "place of birth" on occupation failed to reveal any distinction between those born in the South, possibly in slavery, and those born in Pennsylvania.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, "place of birth" may have had some impact on entrepreneurial spirit as the Southern-born constituted almost one-third of the male labor force, but only two of thirteen entrepreneurs.<sup>17</sup>

The question of compensation or wages is considerably more difficult though not hopeless. If it can be assumed that there was little or no difference between wages paid to whites and blacks per-

forming the same tasks in late nineteenth century Lancaster, then some observations can be made. This may be a difficult assumption from which to proceed, but unfortunately federal, state, and private compilers of wage information focused on occupation, wage, location, and year and ignored the question of race.<sup>18</sup>

Looking at wages in ascending order, servants clearly received the lowest. Though data on servant's wages exist for either Pennsylvania or the Middle Atlantic region for 1850, 1860, 1870, 1890, and 1900, no data or estimates were uncovered for 1880. Based on figures for these other years, however, it is reasonable to estimate that the servant's average yearly wage in 1880 was between \$117 and \$168<sup>19</sup> plus room and board. Genteel, affluent surroundings together with some social status constituted a less tangible form of compensation.

Wages received by common laborers in 1880 were as low as the \$207 yearly average paid to employees of a Lancaster rolling mill, and as high as the \$350 yearly average paid to employees of a Lancaster textile mill.<sup>20</sup> The large difference between the two figures could reflect widely varying daily wage rates; but, more realistically, it is a function of a wide range in "number of days worked." What does not appear statistically is the uncertainty of employment which was frequently associated with common labor.

Above the status of common laborer were those DuBois described as a select class of laborer, and logically they earned higher wages. Within this group in 1880 hod carriers had the lowest yearly average or \$353<sup>21</sup> as their wages were limited not only by the traditional fluctuation of activity in the building trades, but also by the weather. Shearmen in Lancaster rolling mills averaged \$364<sup>22</sup> Hostlers, if employed by the railroad, may have earned as much as \$426<sup>23</sup> yearly while teamsters averaged \$439.<sup>24</sup> Actually, no black called himself a teamster in the census, but quite possible some engaged in "hauling" fit into this category. If those who listed their occupation as porter worked for the railroad, their average annual wage in 1880 may have been as high as \$450.<sup>25</sup> The basic point is that those performing a select class of labor could expect to earn between \$350 and \$450 yearly.

Wage levels for skilled Negroes in Lancaster in 1880 are unavailable with one exception: blacksmiths had average annual earnings of between \$366 and \$543.<sup>26</sup> The greater portion of skilled blacks, however, were barbers and their income, whether self-employed or working for someone, is simply unknown. The most that can be said is that skilled blacks probably earned more than the laboring classes. Information concerning the income of entrepreneurs and professionals is also unavailable, and there is little or no basis for estimating.

The aforementioned wages for servants, common laborers, a select class of laborers, and the skilled have little meaning unless they can be compared with some meaningful standard wage. One

standard which could be used is the average wage paid in Lancaster according to the Manufactures Census of 1880 or \$276.<sup>27</sup> This figure is derived by simply dividing the number of people who worked into the total wages paid. This kind of analysis produces a strong downward bias since it includes both female and child labor together with those who worked only a short time during the year. A better standard is provided by Stanley Lebergott's estimate for the earnings of nonfarm employees which for 1880 is \$386.<sup>28</sup> This estimate has an upward bias as it does not allow for unemployment but a standard with an upward bias serves as a safeguard against overstating the well-being of the Lancaster Negro.

This standard suggests that roughly half of the Negro male labor force earned less than the hypothetical average nonfarm worker in 1880 though the more fortunate common laborers may have earned close to the standard. The remaining half, however, especially the select class of laborers and the skilled, apparently earned as much or more. In addition, it is important to recognize that this \$386 figure is not a "poverty line" but rather an average yearly earning for nonfarm workers. Thus, many earning less than \$386 could still provide their families with the "basic necessities." This analysis of jobs and wages clearly demonstrates that Negro male workers were frequently within the mainstream of Lancaster's economy in 1880.

The black female was far less fortunate as her employment was confined almost exclusively to domestic servant or washerwoman. Out of sixty-four females listing occupations in the 1880 census, sixty cited one of the two while the remaining four cited doctress, seamstress, hauling, and general work.<sup>29</sup> Little can be said concerning wages paid to domestic servants beyond what has already been said except that female servants were consistently paid less than male servants.<sup>30</sup>

Given such limited opportunity, it is necessary to ask whether any sought employment in less reputable avenues of endeavor. While there is no hard evidence available for Lancaster, DuBois found that in Philadelphia's Seventh Ward this was true of 4.7 percent of the black female labor force.<sup>31</sup> Possibly this percentage could be applied in Lancaster.<sup>32</sup> Surely the black female, unlike the black male, did not find her way into the mainstream of the area's labor market.

Job opportunities and wages earned logically influenced the kind of housing blacks obtained. It is therefore interesting to ask how the value of homes in the Seventh Ward, which housed almost half of the black community, compared with the value of homes elsewhere in Lancaster. The real difficulty here is finding another ward as residential as the Seventh. The First, Second, Third, and Fourth Wards constituted the town's core and thus contained several high-value, commercial properties. The Sixth and Ninth Wards contained considerable industrial land use while the Eighth Ward

was unrepresentative as it housed a majority of Lancaster's recent Irish and German immigrants. The Fifth Ward, however, provides an interesting point of comparison as it was largely residential (with the exception of nontaxable institutional property), housed few immigrants, and only five blacks in 1880.<sup>33</sup> The Fifth Ward, then, represents a native, white, residential neighborhood.

By taking the aggregate property assessment figure for each ward for 1880<sup>34</sup> and dividing it by the number of properties assessed, an average for each property in each ward was obtained. For the Seventh Ward the average was \$721.<sup>35</sup> The average for the Fifth Ward, however, was \$1,162; and it is the difference between these two figures which best illustrates the relative value of homes in which blacks and native whites lived in Lancaster.

One other indication of the relative value of property in Lancaster exists in a report entitled: "Unpaid Taxes for 1879." Assuming that the propensity to pay taxes was no greater in one ward than another, the amount of unpaid taxes in each ward reflects the value of property in that ward. Working from this assumption, it is interesting to note that the Seventh Ward was responsible for only \$586 in unpaid property taxes in 1879 while all other wards generated between \$739 and \$2,748 in unpaid taxes.<sup>36</sup> To suggest that the low figure for the Seventh Ward was not a reflection of low property values requires demonstrating that the citizens of that ward were, for some reason, unusually zealous tax payers. This alternative explanation, however, lacks plausibility.

Having established that the prime concentration of Negroes did not live in the most affluent part of town,<sup>37</sup> it is impressive to note how many owned<sup>38</sup> their own homes. By taking the names and addresses of all blacks from the 1880 manuscript census and matching them with names and addresses in the Lancaster tax assessment records it was found that twenty blacks owned property in 1880.<sup>39</sup> Two-thirds of these properties were in the Seventh Ward, and the "typical property" consisted of a house on a quarter acre lot with a gross valuation of \$725.<sup>40</sup> Six of the properties, however, had a gross valuation in excess of \$1,000. Five of the twenty property owners were Southern-born<sup>41</sup> though property held by four of the five ranged from only \$300 to \$630 in value. This suggests that "place of birth" may have influenced "home ownership."

The existence of 20 property owners and 112 "heads of family"<sup>42</sup> among Lancaster Negroes indicates that 17.9 percent of the family heads owned their own homes.<sup>43</sup> This is almost one in five and seems high. For example, the DuBois study of the Philadelphia Negro in the 1890's showed only 7.4 percent of family heads owning homes.<sup>44</sup> DuBois argues that Negroes had little faith in banks, the prime source of mortgage money, and therefore put their money into the construction of impressive churches and lodge halls.<sup>45</sup> There is little evidence to suggest that this was the case in Lancaster. The most that can be said with certainty is that when the

Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church on Strawberry Street burned in 1879, it was rebuilt at a cost of \$2,300.<sup>46</sup> This is a very modest figure even for 1879; and furthermore, it is highly probable that in the wake of the tragedy other churches contributed to the construction of a new Bethel A.M.E. This suggests that while the Philadelphia Negro may have put his wealth into black institutions, the Lancaster Negro was more interested in home ownership. There is no reason to believe that the relatively modest value of the home he purchased dampened this interest.

The thrust of this analysis of the economic status of Negroes in late nineteenth century Lancaster is basically positive. This is especially true with regard to home ownership and the occupational level and wages of males. The reason for this positive scenario is not clear, but one explanation does stand out. The Negro community in Lancaster constituted only one percent of the population in 1870 and two percent in 1880 and 1890. It is, therefore, unlikely that the Negro posed much of a social, political, or economic threat to the remaining ninety-eight percent. The absence of any threat was conducive to a relatively benign attitude on the part of the white, and this benign attitude created a setting in which the Negro could progress.

All of this points to the possibility that the small town in the North may have offered the Negro a more favorable environment than either the reconstructed South or the cities of the North. It would be interesting, therefore, to know more about the condition of blacks in other towns. Did they fare as well in towns less prosperous than Lancaster? Surely there is a need for additional study concerning the status of Negroes in nineteenth century towns.  
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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Thomas R. Winpenny currently is assistant professor of history in Elizabethtown College. He is married and has one son. After receiving his bachelor of arts degree in 1964 from The Pennsylvania State University, he entered upon graduate work at the same university from which he received a master of art in history in 1965. Last year (1973) the University of Delaware awarded him a doctor of philosophy degree after completing a thorough and far-reaching program in doctoral studies under Harold F. Williamson, Stephen Salsbury, Raymond Wolters, and Stephen Lukashovich. During his graduate studies Dr. Winpenny received grants from Princeton and Rutgers, and from the University of California, Davis. From 1970 to 1972 he was associated with the Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation as a research fellow.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Some of the more important studies on this topic have been done by Oscar Zeichner, "The Transition from Slave to Free Agricultural Labor in the

Southern States," *Agricultural History*, XIII (January, 1939), 22-33; Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, "The Ex-Slave in the Post-Bellum South: A Study of the Economic Impact of Racism in a Market Environment," *The Journal of Economic History*, XXXIII (March, 1973), 131-148; Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier* (New York: Harper and Row, 1945); W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1969); John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); and Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (New York: Knopf, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Some of the more important studies on this topic have been done by August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966); Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Arna W. Bontemps and Jack Conroy, *They Seek a City* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1945); W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1967); and Mary White Ovington, *Half a Man* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969).

<sup>3</sup> Most of the data in this study are for the year 1880 since this was the only year in which the manuscript census and Lancaster tax assessment data overlapped.

<sup>4</sup> Despite census definitions, Frederic S. Klein refers to Lancaster as a "town" as late as the 1880's. Frederic S. Klein, *Lancaster County Since 1841* (Lancaster: The Lancaster County National Bank, 1955), 99.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-100.

<sup>6</sup> U.S., Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States: 1880. Population*, I, 423; and *Eleventh Census of the United States: 1890. Population*, I, 551.

<sup>7</sup> Computed from the original manuscript schedules of the United States Census of 1880.

<sup>8</sup> Compiled from the original manuscript schedules of the United States Census of 1880.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> U.S., Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900. Population*, I, 676.

<sup>11</sup> Computed from the original manuscript schedules of the United States Census of 1880.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> In this analysis a barber was considered a skilled worker.

<sup>14</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1967), 101.

<sup>15</sup> Compiled from a survey of *Lancaster City Directories* for the years 1875 through 1886.

<sup>16</sup> Computed from the original manuscript schedules of the United States Census of 1880.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* A larger number of entrepreneurs would be necessary before anything more conclusive could be said.

<sup>18</sup> One other assumption that is made is that occasionally it may be valid to substitute state for local wage data. The belief here is that averages for Lancaster were not that far removed from averages for Pennsylvania since wages in the town were no doubt lower than those in Philadelphia or Pittsburgh and yet higher than those in more remote areas.

<sup>19</sup> See Stanley Lebergott, *Manpower in Economic Growth* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 542; and Gail Laughlin and Lucy Salmon, "Domestic Service," *Report of the U.S. Industrial Commission*, XIV, 1901.

<sup>20</sup> Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, *Annual Report of the Secretary of Internal Affairs, 1879-1880*, VII, 209, 222.

<sup>21</sup> U.S., Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. *History of Wages in the United States from Colonial Times to 1928*, 178.



- <sup>22</sup> *Annual Report of the Secretary of Internal Affairs*, VII, 209.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 226-227.
- <sup>24</sup> *History of Wages in the United States*, 448.
- <sup>25</sup> *Annual Report of the Secretary of Internal Affairs*, VII, 224-225.
- <sup>26</sup> See *Ibid.*, 209, 222; and *History of Wages in the United States*, 275.
- <sup>27</sup> U.S., Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States: 1880. Social Statistics of Cities*, I, 768.
- <sup>28</sup> Lebergott, 528.
- <sup>29</sup> Compiled from the original manuscript schedules of the United States Census of 1880.
- <sup>30</sup> DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 446-447.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.
- <sup>32</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that the Lancaster Negro community was generally anything other than law-abiding. In the year 1878-1879 they constituted roughly 2 percent of the population and 3.8 percent of those arrested. Note, however, that the 3.8 percent figure represents "arrests" and not "convictions." *Report of the Chief of Police, 1878-1879* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1879).
- <sup>33</sup> Compiled from the original manuscript schedules of the United States Census of 1880.
- <sup>34</sup> *Annual Report of the Secretary of Internal Affairs*, V, 87.
- <sup>35</sup> Interestingly, this was not the lowest average as the immigrant-dominated Eighth Ward produced an average of only \$714. In any meaningful sense, of course, there is no difference between these two figures.
- <sup>36</sup> "Unpaid Taxes for 1879," *Report of the Finance Committee* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1879).
- <sup>37</sup> Of course there is more to a neighborhood than property values, but intangibles are extremely difficult to measure.
- <sup>38</sup> The term "owned" here includes those who were in the process of paying off a mortgage.
- <sup>39</sup> *Annual Tax Assessment Report* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1880).
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>41</sup> Compiled from the original manuscript schedules of the United States Census of 1880.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>43</sup> Though data on the percentage of white family heads owning homes was not readily available, it is safe to assume that the percentage was considerably higher.
- <sup>44</sup> DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 181.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 221
- <sup>46</sup> H.M.J. Klein, *Lancaster County Pennsylvania* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1924), II, 811.