

EVEN HERE

A STUDY OF THE STATUS OF NEGROES
IN THE SOCIAL ARRANGEMENT OF
LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA

BY
ELLIS NATHANIEL ZUCKERMAN

C. M. Hood.

NYAN HONG

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OF LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA

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BY

ELLIS NATHANIEL ECKENMAN
WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY
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EVEN HEREA STUDY OF THE STATUS OF NEGROES IN THE SOCIAL ARRANGEMENT
OF LEXINGTON, VIRGINIAFOREWORD

Several years ago I became aware of the existence of a class of Negroes of whom I had had no previous knowledge. My home is in Petersburg, Virginia, a city of about thirty-five thousand residents, approximately fifty percent of whom are colored. Until high school age I knew of Negroes only as domestic servants and menial laborers. I had never heard one addressed as Mr., Mrs., or Dr. and though only thirteen or fourteen years old, I cannot recall ever having so acknowledged any colored adult.....it just wasn't being done, and at that age I was intimately concerned in avoiding parental correction for doing "what's right" wrongly. I was naturally surprised, and recall my reaction quite vividly when, on a visit to my father's office, I distinctly heard him address a rotund colored woman as Mrs. James. My father introduced me to her, and I hesitatingly greeted her smile and very properly extended hand. She holds the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English and teaches at the nearby Virginia State College for Negroes. After that I met a number of the faculty in similar fashion and at virtuoso concerts held at the school semi-annually. I learned that there were such things as colored physicians, ministers, attorneys, and professional workers of many varieties

along with businessmen, clerical workers and the accustomed laborersand all this right there in "my" home town! Residential segregation along with separate schools, places of worship and recreation, and town customs prevented my having any close contact with younger members of the Negro race, and of course an early adolescent has little common interest with adults other than family, neighbors, and friends. As a result my consciousness of the existence of high types of Negroes lay dormant until the summer after my first year at Washington and Lee University. At that time I undertook a special course of six weeks' duration at Columbia University in New York City. The chief instructor and I were the only Southerners in the class. There was included in the class a clean-cut, well-dressed Negro man, slightly older than I. He was among a group of several gathered about the instructor after the first day's class, as I told her of my inability previously to procure living quarters in the neighborhood. This man from Indiana volunteered his assistance in my behalf, which I accepted somewhat hesitantly and only on detecting a slight nod from the feminine instructor from Tennessee. In short, he and I became close friends and saw a great deal of one another both socially and scholastically in the following weeks along with our other friends, mostly white, since they comprised a major portion of the inter-mixed dormitory. His friendship has meant a great deal to me...it served to illustrate more vividly than could any other experience the necessity of judging one's fellow humans as individuals...as relegated to membership by strict grouping only to the zoological genus *Homo* and species *Sapiens*.

The mentioned friend, George Anderson, will receive the degree

of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Guidance this month. This paper is dedicated to him.

The purpose of this paper is to bring to the white residents of Lexington, Virginia, a closer insight into the problems experienced by Negroes here and, if such be possible, a view of their feelings concerning their own situation as expressed to me during extended conversations held mostly in their own homes. The views of many local white residents on the subjects discussed will be correlated as closely as possible.

My indebtedness for assistance with the paper exceeds that of the writer of most types of reports. Gratitude in abundance is due the numerous members of both races, whose factual and emotional contributions I shall endeavor to interpret herein.

E. N. E.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PEOPLE

Lexington, Virginia, is the county seat, shopping, recreational, and medical center of Rockbridge County. As such, it is difficult to draw lines of separation between its activities and those of the county at large. Therefore, it is desirable for the reader of this study to recognize that Lexington's approximate Negro population of 1,100, while constituting nearly one third of the town's total of 3,914 persons (permanent residents, 1940), composes almost one half of the entire county's estimated 2,400 Negroes, only about one ninth of the county's 1940 total of 22,384. All of these figures are exclusive of the city of Buena Vista.

Lexington's 1,100 persons legally designated by the Virginia Code as Negroes are employed in large part as servants, either as general domestic workers in private homes or as cooks, waiters, or janitors at business places, fraternity houses, Washington and Lee University, and the Virginia Military Institute. A second sizeable number are employed variously in and about the town as laborers. There are, among the group, twenty-five college graduates and about ten persons, who have completed one or more years of college without graduating. There was no accurate measure of the number of high school graduates, since the colored school system has included a complete high school curriculum only since 1940. Of the remainder of the populace there are few illiterates, those being found largely among the aged.

Of the college graduates one is employed as waitress at a fraternity house; eleven are public school teachers including five in the elementary department and the remaining six in the high school. The latter number embraces the school principal, who holds two Master of Arts degrees and his wife, who has earned one such degree. The remaining teachers hold baccalaureates. There are two physicians each of whom has also earned an undergraduate degree. There is one Negro dentist. One colored minister holds the degree of Bachelor of Arts and received his Bachelor of Divinity degree at a renowned interdenominational, inter-racial seminary in Massachusetts. The other minister holds comparable degrees and an added Master of Arts from Northwestern University. Thus, except for the physicians, all graduate degrees were received from large universities providing education to those qualified by ability and preparation rather than by dermal pigmentation.

The colored insurance agent and his business associate-son are both graduates of Virginia colleges. Besides the mentioned son, one other has completed college, one is in college, and a fourth son is graduating this term with honors from a large Negro high school in Richmond and has been accepted by Harvard University for entrance in the fall. The two daughters of this family are both college graduates. The remainder of the colored college and university graduates here are housewives.

Additional members of the colored segment of Lexington's citizenry have attended trade schools.

My purpose in outlining these educational advancements in such detail is to illustrate the ability of the colored people to utilize such cultural advantages. I have found that many white people in Lexington feel that Negroes as a whole lack such ability. Obviously all Negroes do not possess such superior intellect as those I have just pointed out, but neither do all the whites. The majority of this advanced element had to earn sufficient funds to pay for their educational and personal expenses in college; some even had to aid in part in the support of parental families. Today a higher percentage of Negroes reaching high school finish than do whites in the Lexington schools. Of those who complete this secondary education, a higher percentage of Negroes than whites have in recent years entered college, and the Annual Report for the Session 1947-48 of the Rockbridge County Superintendent of Schools shows that graduates of the colored high school are undertaking and satisfactorily passing in "standard colleges" a higher relative number of session hours than are white students from the county. Ability would seem in these

cases to work hand in hand with necessity to produce excellence.

The desire to advance their own standing and that of their race at the same time has served to inspire today's Negroes to prepare themselves in larger numbers for teaching than any other profession. Stability of employment and social prestige have doubtlessly played significant roles in this trend. A survey made a few months ago by the faculty of the Negro high school showed that both students and parents regard as desirable post-high school training of the following types in order: teaching, nursing, medicine, law, pharmacy, social work, and writing. Other fields were suggested by parents and still others by the students, but of significance is the placement of these professions in highest order of desire by both groups. Business and skilled labor followed in subsequent order of desirability. Of much consideration to these people, I have found, is the necessity of establishing themselves elsewhere once such goals are attained. Lexington can and will this year absorb a few more teachers, but can it in, say, ten years absorb several more colored doctors, and what would be the fate of colored lawyers and pharmacists in the local mold? Even in larger cities members of such professions are confined to practice largely among their fellow Negroes. This circumstance being true, it is not difficult to understand why so many colored students are disinclined ever to achieve the high school level of education. To the Negro of Lexington today, lack of opportunity means many things. Among such absences are finance, access because of color to institutions of higher learning, and opportunities for application of training once attained.

When the grade of employment of members of a large group as a whole is as low as is that of most Negroes in Lexington, the

average economic status of the group must also appear low. The professions mentioned above are supplemented by three barber shops and two restaurants to provide the generously remunerative occupations for Negroes in the town. Since employment in these businesses is highly limited, there is keen competition for positions in the dining halls of the town's two colleges and in the fraternity houses. The latter offer relatively high wages both to cooks and houseboy-waiters. Wages at the former are also higher than in most positions open to colored workers and have the added advantage of allowing the worker to carry home such uneaten food or excess as would be insufficient to supply another meal for the hall. Positions with the colleges as janitors and caretakers are also much sought after, pay livable wages, and provide a degree of social distinction, not regarded as automatically adherent in the other positions mentioned. The total of all these college-dependant positions is about 170 full-time workers and about 20 additional part-time fraternity house workers. After discounting these regular workers there are left of the town's 1,100 Negroes approximately 50 who might be regarded as holding positions of equal compensation financially to those mentioned. This group is made up of restaurant and hospital waiters, cooks, and orderlies. The 850 yet unmentioned work as domestic servants, unskilled laborers, gardeners, etc., or are unemployed wives, children, and disabled and aged persons on public relief.

It has been a tradition in Lexington that Negroes exclusively be hired as domestics, cooks, waiters, and janitors. As a result there is no competition with white workers, which might cause a lowering of their wage scale. Conversely, however, the white residents are eligible for all of the higher paying jobs in Lexington

and at the manufacturing plants in neighboring towns for which Negroes are given no opportunity to compete. In recent years as costs of living have risen, so also have wages. It is generally believed, however, that Negroes, who have for years earned only bare subsistence wages, can survive on what has amounted in most cases to only a slight increase over pre-war wages. This has not proven so for most of the group of 850 mentioned above, and the result has been that most of them have been compelled to undertake whatever part-time work is available in addition to their regular jobs.

There is no reason to deny that there are many indolent Negroes here, just as there is an even larger percentage of lazy and idle whites. The general inclination, however, among the well-to-do white residents is to let a decadent minority typify the basic inclinations of colored people at large. As I have sought to point out, the Negroes here are far more ambitious and able as a whole than we have given them an opportunity to demonstrate. Were there established a higher wage scale comparable to that of white workers in equally skilled or unskilled work, I firmly believe that many more Negroes than have so far been able could and would prove their ability to elevate the general lot as have an admirable few here already.

In the eighty years since the legal emancipation of their ancestors, the Negroes of Lexington have built up within the limits of their society social levels and organizations not very unlike our own. Employment, scholastic and other training, financial status, and to a lesser extent here than in much of the south tone of skin color, have played their roles in addition to individual personality

to establish the levels. Advancement in any one of these features results in an elevated social position, and quite naturally the person possessing more than one such desirable attribute will be placed above those not so qualified. It is very much the same process that white society has used throughout the years. In addition to diversion found among one's family and circle of intimate friends, there have arisen many clubs, fraternities, women's circles, and church groups. Laboring folk, however, have less time for these activities than the upper classes, and I have found from walking about the town's three distinct colored neighborhoods and talking with the poorer folk, that their family groups are much more closely knit than are most white families of comparable means. The majority of Negroes have learned to make the most of very little. One man expressed the condition well by telling how he and his family have learned to supplement their incomes and fill their oil lamps and stomachs with the love that their white employers have had for them and their ancestors since pre-war (1861) days.

Most of Lexington's colored citizens have a great deal of pride and endurance, as attested by workers of the Public Welfare Bureau of Lexington and Rockbridge County. The latter have found that poor or disabled white residents in many instances come to the Bureau for financial and other similar services as soon as their depleted state qualifies them. Rarely, however, does this happen with Negroes of similar circumstances. They feel that it is degrading to give oneself over as a public charge and usually manage to keep going until they simply have no choice other than to accept this assistance. Again it can be said that there are those few

among the race here as elsewhere, who feel that they would not be in such straits were it not for their state of suppression. This group would and does show no hesitancy in accepting the aid of others, but again let me emphasize that their element in Lexington is small.

Finally I should like to express the observation that the colored residents of Lexington as a group and in most individual cases are well fitted to the fuller rights of citizenship, which they seek.

CHAPTER TWO
POINTS OF CONTENTION

It is frequently difficult for us to realize that the colored people of today, the descendants of our great-grandparents' legally owned servants, have become clear and forward thinking, educated, and well assimilated citizens; this despite all the high hurdles that we have placed along their course. Not all have reached such heights, but the fact that so many have already would indicate that more can and will yet advance still further.

In seeking to find how most Negroes feel about their status in the Lexington scheme of things, I was told repeatedly that their position is highly favorable as compared to most cities and towns of the South. They feel that there is a friendship generally expressed here between whites and colored residents that is rarely found in the North. They feel that Lexington is as desirable a town as they could now find in which to live and raise their children. Yet even here there are many features of everyday life which they feel to be unjust. All that the Negro asks for

the present and infinite future is the privilege of achieving that progress within his own limits of ability without being restrained by a white fear of them based on tradition and personal inadequacy. He would expect the everyday courtesies shown persons of whatever station he reaches.

Individuals' tastes are shaped by daily contact with the culture about them. In Lexington the Negro has long been exposed to the superior environment of the white homes and college surroundings with which they have been intimately concerned. The Negroes here have learned and have taught their children the customs of their white employers. As their own cultural level has risen over recent decades, they have sought to live as do the white citizens of the same level. They have shown every respect due to their white contacts, but in many instances the reverse has not been the case.

When the average business man in town in his place of business greets a white man whom he knows only slightly or not at all, he usually addresses the potential customer in some such fashion as to utilize the title "Sir" or "Mr.". Not so with an equally unknown Negro except in a few very progressive stores. Aside from these same few, bills are sent out from the retail stores of the town bearing the courtesy titles Mr., Mrs., or Miss to white customers, regardless of their financial or social status; bills to colored patrons bear no such titles unless it has been demanded by the patron. By having a white physician make out a nose drops prescription for me and a colored physician make out the same

prescription to a colored person, both bearing courtesy titles, I established that one local prescription drug store will write over the prescription serial number, if necessary, the full name and title of a white patron on a prescription but will leave off entirely the name of a Negro patron. If a person is respectable in his work and life, is he not the same degree of courtesy whether white or colored? It's such a little thing and yet it would serve to build up a much warmer relation between the races. And to those who think in terms of dollars and cents, I refer the statement of one of the town's leading Negro citizens to the effect that he and most others simply patronize competing stores, when such discourtesies and malpractice as pointed out above occur, or when white customers who have come in after them are deliberately waited on first. There are other such practices in town, but I shall rest the point.

A different type of discourtesy, which amounts to outright discrimination, is shown by three places of business, the management of each of which feels that he would lose a great deal of his white trade were he to sell the services of his place of business to Negroes. One such place believes that its white customers would object to sitting in the same spacious waiting room, while its service is being rendered. Another expressed the same belief concerning a narrower seating space and stated further, that he knows that ninety percent of his business would drop off were he to let Negroes utilize his rental facility, which as I view it necessitates no seating or intimate contact of customers. This latter person, however, does not "discourage" Negroes from

entering his place of business to purchase his salable merchandise. Neither he nor the previously mentioned businesses has or will test their belief. The third such service utilizes no waiting space and feels that it might deal with what it deems a desirable colored patron. Since none of these business services apparently attracts undesirable types of white patrons, it is unlikely that the Negroes who would take advantage of such services would be undesirable, as the only ones interested are among the upper social and economic class.

The local "second run" theater exerts a prevention of patronage similar to those indicated above. Since the rate of admission is lower than at the same concern's better theater, to which Negroes are accepted for seating in separated balcony sections, it is only natural that any person seeking inexpensive entertainment of the type shown would resent not being admitted even to separately designated rear or side sections seats.

This practice is explained by the management in stating that additional lavatory facilities would have to be provided Negro patrons. The Virginia Code confirms this. Since the ownership of the theaters is said by their manager to be in a state of flux, thereby preventing any large expenditures, there seems to be no immediate solution to this problem of a somewhat less pressing significance.

A somewhat more disturbing local discrimination concerns the facilities for colored travelers at the bus station. There is on the ground level a waiting room on which either the management of the associated drug store or the bus company spent \$1500 for improvement some two years ago. This was done at the request of

several interested townsfolk. All felt that some improvement was made. None do or did then feel that the waiting room is as yet adequate for its designated function. The room for Negroes is dingy and inadequately lighted. The most readily detectable ventilation is the stench emanating from the ill-equipped and kept men's lavatory. On the three occasions that the writer has braved this room in the last three weeks (on different days of the week and at widely separated hours on each occasion) there has been on one of the benches in the room a garbage pail from the adjoining downstairs kitchen. Admitting that travelers might wait and sit out-of-doors, a further and clearer partiality is shown to whites who can order and be served food at the upstairs fountain, while not even a single booth in the rear of the store is designated for Negroes. They can stand at the end of the fountain and order food, but must return to the aromatic and unappetizing atmosphere of their waiting room or the outside to eat their purchases. Surely a designated booth, a urinal, and a coat of paint are not too much to ask to alleviate this set of difficulties!

What few sidewalks there are in the colored neighborhoods are so badly broken up, that the progress of pedestrians along them in the absence of adequate street lighting is only slower than the recognition and rectification of these hazards by the city fathers.

Lexington's white dentists have a tradition, which one told me has apparently been in force here as long as the dental practice. That is, that they will not ordinarily accept colored patients. My informant of long-standing practice in the commu-

ity feels that his white patients would "stop coming", if they had to succeed colored patients to his chair for treatment with supposedly steam sterilized instruments. In an emergency this dentist will "relieve the pain" but give no further treatment to a Lexingtonian whose external flesh coloration happened by chance of birth to be brown.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LOCAL HOSPITAL

The point of greatest contention in colored-white relations in the community concerns the prevention of colored physicians from treating their patients in the local hospital.

The hospital is a private institution owned and controlled by the local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. A Hospital Board consisting of ten members of this organization determines the policies of the institution. One such apparently unwritten policy forbids Negro physicians from continuing to treat their patients in the hospital as they do without.

To understand better all sides of the issue it is well to know that the two Negro physicians in Lexington are both fully qualified and licensed to practice medicine in the State of Virginia. Both received college degrees before entering medical school. Both graduated from the Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, a school approved as grade A by the American

Medical Association. One of these doctors had two years of general interning at an accredited St. Louis, Missouri, hospital. The other had one year of general internship and one year of residency in obstetrics and gynecology at an approved large hospital in Washington, D. C.. The state requirement for practice is only one year of internship. This means that the physician, who had two years of interning, is as well qualified for general practice as any such practitioner in Lexington, while the physician who held a year's residency in obstetrics is better prepared by virtue of formal preparation to handle deliveries of babies than any white general practitioner here. Yet neither of these men can treat a patient or deliver a baby in Jackson Memorial Hospital.

When a colored doctor finds that his patient absolutely must have hospital care, he must turn over the case to a white doctor, who will continue treating the patient so long as hospitalization is necessary. As a result of this the patient loses the advantage of continued treatment of his case by the physician most familiar with what has previously been indicative of the illness. The patient's own colored doctor may visit him only as an outsider and except through discussions with the white doctor may not advise treatment.

It is standard practice for the attending white physician to serve as anesthetist and assist the operating surgeon in whatever fashion necessary, when his patients require the services of

such a specialist. The colored doctors are again barred from action, thereby losing a standard fee, and may only stand by and watch operations performed.

Of further significance concerning these doctors is their division of practice between white and colored patients. One of them has a 98% colored practice with only the remaining 2% white, while the other has a practice of between 90 and 95% white, the remainder being colored. The majority of the latter doctor's white practice are of poor folk in and about town. A number, however, are well off and unlike the rest could afford private rooms in the hospital.

I have spoken at length with these doctors, with nine of the ten white doctors of Lexington, with the chairman of the U. S. S. hospital board, and with the professional administrator of the hospital. Also consulted for their feelings on the matter were several white and colored townsfolk, including a few U. S. C. members. All of the latter group feel that something should be done to correct the injustice being done both these doctors and their patients. Seven of the nine white doctors interviewed feel that something should be done to give the colored doctors hospital privileges and these seven would be willing to work with these men. Since one of these two dissenting doctors, who feel such changes unnecessary, is no longer in active practice, a great majority of the doctors can be said to have no objection personally to giving the colored doctors the desired privileges.

There are several matters that would seem of difficulty to most of the white persons questioned on this hospital matter. One is the belief that the white nurses would be unwilling to work under the directions of colored doctors even though all such work would be for the patients' and not for the doctors' benefit. My efforts to get the feelings of the chief of nurses on the matter were stymied by her refusal to even discuss the matter, telling me repeatedly that her home is in South Carolina, and referring me to the hospital administrator. I do not believe that such feelings as hers typify those of the other nurses, but even if such were the case, I have been told by the administrator that he is sure that colored registered nurses can readily be obtained, and one of the two colored practical nurses has assured me that she would be willing to accept the necessary discriminations at the hospital as regards eating and dressing facilities to further this cause.

Another likely difficulty in the minds of most whites is that white ward patients would object to colored doctors treating their white patients in the same wards. Even the colored doctors feel that this might be so. And the colored doctor with the large white practice believes that his white patients would not want to be placed in the colored ward.

The colored quarters consist of two small ward rooms on the ground level in the new wing of the hospital. They are as desirable as any ward room in the hospital. They are at the far end of

a rather long corridor and separated by some distance from the nearest white quarters, except that these rooms plus a small private room, when there is no need of them by the colored people, are used for white patients from otherwise overcrowded wards. It is rather difficult to understand how colored doctors could be objected to in this isolated region despite any amount of Negro dislike, which Lexington prides itself on having so little of.

All these circumstances being true, I believe that there is needed only the action of the U. S. C. board, the hospital administrator, and the majority of sympathetic white doctors to make it possible within a few weeks for colored doctors to treat their colored patients in the colored ward, if necessary with colored nurses. This would be a decided advancement for the colored people of Lexington and would serve to express a feeling of closeness between the two races.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSIONS

There exists in Lexington a greater feeling of good will between the white and colored races than is found in most Eastern towns and cities. There are, however, many actions that the white residents can perform to inspire their colored neighbors to improve their lot even beyond the present state of elevation and so become even better citizens. For the white Lexingtonian this means simply assuming of consciousness of the added dif-

difficulties being experienced daily by nearly one-third of the town's residents and never by the remaining two-thirds. It is difficult to conceive of this awareness existing without at least some resultant advancement of colored status of prestige and culture.

I have attempted in the preceding pages to point out the most pressing racial problems met here by colored persons. Many other such points of contention are of lesser significance on the present scene and have not been herein mentioned, since they are exemplified by those cited in Chapter Two. Individuals or small groups of white citizens control these situations. I find difficulty in believing that increased knowledge on the part of the local white citizens of the local colored people and their plight could fail to result in an improvement of their situation.

The matters discussed throughout the paper are of concern to every citizen of the town. Through a combined effort of personal actions and exerted influence much progress can result. Expressions of feelings by white residents to the town's merchants and members of the hospital board will carry the movement far, and a new warmth in our relations with the town's colored people will result.

