

Three Centuries of Struggle for Negro Democratic Rights

By Doxey Wilkerson

Negro History Week—1944 finds the Negro people moving more swiftly toward their goal of full democratic rights than at any time during the past seventy years. The iron necessities of this people's war of national survival have placed the "Negro Problem" on the agenda of history for early and fundamental solution.

The Negro people are now coming to be viewed less as a "problem," and more as invaluable allies in the struggle against pro-fascist reaction. Their firm alignment with the democratic national coalition now being welded together is urgently required to achieve the progressive perspectives of Tehran.

As our nation proceeds to redefine its relations to the Negro people, it should be helpful briefly to review the past three centuries of struggle for Negro democratic rights. Now, as at every stage of our country's history, the struggles of the Negro people for freedom are integrally bound up with the progress—or retrogression—of American democracy as a whole.

Beginning of Slavery

Negroes were first brought to America in the early 17th century, not as slaves, but as indentured servants. As was then customary, they sold themselves into bondage for periods of from five to seven (or more) years to pay for their pas-

sage to America. After that they were set free.

Frequently, under the pretext of penalties for running away, the period of indenture was extended. Gradually, there developed the system of "permanent indenture," or Negro slavery, which became recognized by Virginia law as early as 1661.

This early slavery was primarily domestic and patriarchal. Only later, with the rise of cotton production in the South, did it assume a harsh and institutionalized character.

Rise and Decline of the Slave Trade

Slavery soon died out in the North. The character of the land and climate were not suited for the crops and type of agriculture to which slave labor was adapted. Nor was it practical, or "safe," to employ any large number of slaves in manufacturing.

In the South, however, both climate and soil were ideally suited to large-scale cultivation of tobacco and cotton through the extensive use of slave labor. Moreover, the southern agrarian economy, with its feudalistic plantations, was well adapted to slavery. There the slave system flourished.

During most of the 18th century, approximately 25,000 to 30,000 slaves were brought to this country each year. They were torn from widely scattered tribes with varying languages and cultures on the continent of Africa. Four times as many died or were killed as finally reached the American markets. Here they were formed into an agricultural people, denied all rights of citizenship, and subjected to the harsh brutality of the "Black Codes."

During the period of the American Revolution, however, there was a definite weakening of the slave system. The basic economic cause was the declining value of cotton production, which suffered because no efficient technique had been devised to separate the cotton from the seed. Then, too, the egalitarian idealism of the Revolution, the heroism of Negro soldiers in the Continental Army, and the terror which arose in the hearts of the white South when the Haitian slaves revolted against their French masters—all gave rise to strong anti-slavery sentiment and to a pronounced weakening of the slave system.

Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration of Independence indicted



"EMANCIPATION OF NEGRO SLAVES"—A mural by Eitaro Ishagaki. Reading from left to right, the central figures are, Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, John Brown and Abraham Lincoln.

King George III, for the slave trade, but had to be revised under pressure from Georgia and South Carolina. Similarly, Jefferson wrote, and was forced to withdraw, an anti-slavery clause in an early draft of the Constitution. Most of the leaders of the American Revolution were outspoken in their denunciation of slavery.

There were very substantial advances in the Negro's status during these later decades of the 18th century. Many who fought in the war were freed. The "Black Codes" were moderated. Laws facilitating manumission became general. Restrictions against the teaching of slaves were relaxed. Slavery was legally abolished in many northern states. The Northwest Ordinance excluded slavery forever from the Northwest Territory. This period is characterized by Woodson as "the heyday of victory for the ante-bellum Negro."

But this progressive trend was short-lived. The cotton gin was invented in 1793. Big profits loomed ahead for southern planters. Cotton production began rapidly to ex-

pand. Demands for slave labor increased. Harsh and oppressive restrictions began again to be imposed upon the now more enlightened, and hence more rebellious, slaves.

1820 to Civil War

The period 1820 to 1860 witnessed the development of two contradictory economic developments which were destined to shape American history, and hence the fate of the Negro people, for more than half a century. They were, first, the rapid growth of urban industrialism in the North, and second, the rapid growth of the plantation economy in the South. The latter is reflected in the rise of cotton production from 4,000 bales in 1790, to 500,000 bales in 1822, to 1,000,000 bales in 1831, and to 5,000,000 bales in 1861. The earlier patriarchal slavery now gave way completely to a harsh, impersonal, institutionalized system of slavery.

Their aspirations for freedom now much more developed, the slaves rebelled against this intensified oppression. Hundreds of slave revolts broke out all over the South. Tens

of thousands of slaves ran away from the plantations and escaped to freedom through the aid of white and Negro abolitionists in the North. Many others were beaten and murdered in the attempt.

The aggressive role of the South in national politics during this period reflected the impelling economic necessity for southern planters constantly to extend the area of cotton culture under the slave-plantation system. It brought them into inevitable collision with the rising bourgeoisie of the North, who likewise sought to clear the path for the further expansion of industrial capitalism. This latter economic necessity enhanced tremendously the political power of the growing Abolitionist movement in the North.

Slavery simply had to expand—or die. Thus, with the 1860 election to governmental power of a Party pledged against any further extension of slavery, the southern planters realized that parliamentary procedures could no longer serve their economic interest. It was then that they precipitated the Civil War.

(Continued Tomorrow)