

# The second danger is for the people of alabama

[People](#)



Alabama faces two problems regarding race relations. One is tiring of the work just as the blonde girl in the old joke, who swims half-way across a lake, declares she is too tired to make it all the way, and then swims back to the side she started on. If the residents of Alabama grow tired of progressing, they too, might someday end up back where they started. The labor of generations, then, would be wasted.

The second danger is for the people of Alabama to believe that enough progress has been made. It is easy to think of one's own generation as the most advanced in all of time. Yet, a look back at history shows that previous generations felt the same way. An examination of the attitudes and actions of the progressives in the past sheds some light on how far Alabama has come and how far it might still need to go.

Many people today portray slave masters as wicked, violent men, who beat their slaves constantly and neglected their needs. This is not a completely accurate picture. Indeed, former Alabama slave Alice Gaston[i] (Gaston, 1941, p. 1) in a 1941 interview with Robert Sonkin the following:

All the white folks that know me, they treats me nice. And if I want anything, I'll ask for it. I was taught in that a way by my old master. Don't steal, don't lie, and if you want anything, ask for it. Be honest in what you get. That was what I was raised up with. And I'm that a way today.

Another former slave, Isom Moseley also said that he'd worked for, " might good white folks." (Moseley, 1941) He remembered the white people having shoes for the children and the elderly. Similarly, former slave Joe MacDonald recalled that his master had made sure he was educated, so that he would

be treated well by other white people, once the master and his wife had “died and gone to heaven.” (MacDonald, 1940)

One slave owner fathered a child by a black woman. Instead of denying his paternity, James T. Rapier’s father acknowledged him and hired a private tutor to educate him in secret, because Alabama law, at the time, did not allow blacks to be educated.[ii] Rapier elected to the forty-third congress in 1873 as a republican.

Yet, in some parts of the state, slaves were treated very badly – particularly in the earliest years. In 1824, slaves in Montgomery outnumbered whites. Around half of Alabama’s heads of household were slave owners.

As the number of slaves in Alabama increased, so did per capita wealth. Indeed, in 1930, per capita wealth was \$700, which was unmatched by any other part of the country.[1] These factors lead many whites to fear black insurrection. If Alabama blacks rose up against whites, the outnumbered whites might not be able to stop them.

Therefore, many feared for their lives. Others feared losing their fortunes. If blacks were freed, once great southerners would have to compete with industrialized northerner families in the American economy. It would be extremely hard for them to compete. [iii]

White fear lead to increased oppression. While, for a time, there were free blacks in Alabama, the government chased them out in 1839. An article from The New-Yorker in 1839 declares, “ By a law of the last session of the Alabama legislature, all free persons of color who remain in the state after the 1st of August next are to be enslaved.”[iv]

If a similar ruling were made today, the newspaper editors would call for public outrage. In 1839, the note is simply followed by a warning about yellow fever in New Orleans. Clearly, neither the government, nor the media thought of blacks as equals.

Yet, while the Alabama legislature tried to rid the state of free blacks, it also ruled, in 1852, that owners must properly clothe their slaves. According to Mary Jenkins Schwartz, however, the law was not enforced and frequently broken.[v] Jenkins states that because owners would not follow the law, slaves who had children had a difficult time keeping their children warm. Indeed, she says, on one Alabama plantation, mothers would cut holes in gunny sacks to clothe their sons and daughters.[vi]

Slaves were treated on many plantations as animals. Jenkins reports that many slept on hay. Children were given blankets of inferior quality and expected to share with one another. Children who did not work in the fields on one plantation, were not given food allowances.

Therefore their parents would have to catch animals like rabbits and raccoons to feed them. Indeed, says Jenkins, some children would look forward to working in the fields because they would be able to earn food for themselves to stop their hunger.[vii]

The fact that plantation owners thought of slaves just as people think of animals is also evinced by a number of documents from Alabama in the 1800's. For instance, in 1852, a Parks Landing plantation owner offered a reward of fifty dollars for the return of his runaway slave, Stephen. It reads like a lost pet poster. The plantation owner describes his slave as, " A fine

looking negro” who is “ between twenty-five and thirty years of age,” “ about six-feet high,” “ copper-colored,” with a “ high fore-head”. [viii]

[1] Jenkins reports that slave owners would use this to tempt slaves into putting their children to work in the fields. Those who did would receive, “ one frock apiece.” One boy, who worked carrying water for workers, earned a shirt, two pairs of pantaloons and shoes.

[i] Alice Gaston. “ Interview with Alice Gaston, Gee's Bend, Alabama,” *Voices of Slavery*. Library of Congress. Washington, D. C. 1941.

[ii] Eugene Feldman. “ James T. Rapier, Negro Congressman from Alabama,” *The Phylon Quarterly*. Vol 19. No. 3 1958.

[iii] Clayton W. Williams “ Early Ante-Bellum Montgomery: A Black-Belt Constituency,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 7, No. 4. Nov. 1941.

[iv] “ Free Negroes in Alabama,” *The New Yorker*. Sep. 14, 1839; 7 26. P. 411

[v] Mary Jenkins Schwartz. *Born in Bondage: Growing up Enslaved in the Antebellum South*. (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2000).

[viii] Levi Parks. “ Poster offering fifty dollars reward for the capture of a runaway slave Stephen,” *American Memory*. Library of Congress. Washington, D. C. 1852.