

1972

## Status of Negroes in a Southern Port City in the Progressive Era: Pensacola, 1896-1920

Donald H. Bragow



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Bragow, Donald H. (1972) "Status of Negroes in a Southern Port City in the Progressive Era: Pensacola, 1896-1920," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 51: No. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol51/iss3/6>

**STATUS OF NEGROES IN A SOUTHERN PORT  
CITY IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA:  
PENSACOLA, 1896-1920**

by DONALD H. BRAGAW\*

**B**OOKER T. WASHINGTON in his book, *The Negro in Business*, selected Pensacola, Florida, as a "typical Negro business community" to illustrate the economic progress of blacks since the Civil War. Pensacola, he felt, was "representative of that healthy progressive communal spirit, so necessary to our people. . . ." <sup>1</sup> Washington's information, obtained largely from the periodical pages of the *Colored American*, was quite accurate in describing the community's Negro populace during the period 1896 to approximately 1913. In 1907 *The Voice of the Negro* provided a similar appraisal of Pensacola's Negroes: "It has been equally surprising to note the amount of business done by our people. For instance, in the city of Pensacola, Florida, the amount of capital invested in 1900 was above \$50,000, and the amount of capital that year was over \$250,000. The same and even better may be said of many other cities throughout the South." <sup>2</sup> There were indications of a strong economic and social base established by a small, but seemingly healthy Negro middle class, and a large and growing laboring class whose pay rate on skilled and semiskilled jobs closely approximated the white workers's scale. The rapid growth of Pensacola after 1880 allowed enterprising Negroes to become early participators in providing necessary services. The position of these middle class blacks during a

---

\* Mr. Bragaw is chief of the Bureau of Social Studies Education, New York State Education Department. This article was read at the annual meeting of Southern Historical Association, Houston, November 19, 1971. The dates selected reflect the beginning of substantial Negro data in 1896; 1920 was chosen only to reflect the possible trend of Pensacola in the post-war era. There are also several extensions to 1924 in the use of city directory data.

1. Booker T. Washington, *The Negro in Business* (Boston, 1907), 230.  
2. R. E. Lee, "The Negro National Business League," *The Voice of the Negro*, I (August 1904), 327-31.

period from the late 1890s to 1910 was one of moderate commercial and residential integration and comity.<sup>3</sup> But toward the end of the century's first decade, this relative social acceptance, economic health, and some measure of security changed, and the economic and social status of the Negroes began to decline with few exceptions. It is the purpose of this study to touch upon some of the factors encouraging Negro well-being, to indicate evidence of this decline, and to show its close relation to the concomitant economic decline of the city of Pensacola itself.

Between the coming of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad in the 1880s and World War I, Pensacola rose to some prominence as a major exporting seaport on the gulf coast.<sup>4</sup> This was accounted for in part by its deep natural harbor and its easy access to the Gulf of Mexico. More important, however, was its role as an exporter of the yellow pine which grew in great abundance in the region of the Escambia and Blackwater rivers from the city limits into southern Alabama. Although some cotton and other products were shipped from the port, the preeminence of the pine wood industry controlled the fortunes of the city.<sup>5</sup> Northern capital in the shape of railroad and land speculation were the early supporters of the economic boom of the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>6</sup> Following the establishment of the major export lumber business, additional, and primary, capital came from Europe, mainly England, Germany, and Italy.<sup>7</sup>

- 
3. Interviews with Mrs. Corinne Jones, Pensacola, Florida, April 12, 28, May 7, 1970. Mrs. Jones allowed access to early trade editions of the *Pensacola Florida Sentinel* (1904, 1906), and responded to several interviews and one written questionnaire.
  4. William D. Chipley, *The Naples of Florida and Its Surroundings* (Louisville, 1877), 6.
  5. Pensacola's import statistics never exceeded \$2,000,000 through 1910, and remained below the \$3,000,000 mark for the period to 1920. Export figures ranged progressively higher yearly except for 1902 and 1906-1907: 1900—\$14,413,522; 1905—\$16,258,732; 1907—\$19,463,564; 1909—\$20,969,898; 1912—\$23,866,866. During World War I and after, the export business was severely curtailed; in 1925, the figures show only \$7,816,903. *Pensacolian*, I (July 1909), 1; *ibid.* (November 1909), 1; *Pensacola Journal*, January 1, 1906, 1910, 1913, 1926; *Florida on the Gulf*, I (December 1925).
  6. Emory F. Skinner, *Reminiscences* (Chicago, 1908), is one account of land and railroad speculation in northwest Florida.
  7. Evidences of this European connection are to be found in the Rosasco Papers, John C. Pace Library, University of West Florida, Pensacola and in the John A. Merritt Company records in the files of the company and family, Pensacola.

An additional factor contributing to Pensacola's economic health was the presence over the years of a naval base. While its full operation since the Civil War had been sporadic, the Spanish-American War brought some new life and expansion to the facility. The years following that war, however, again returned the base to an uncertain status. It was to remain on a limited operational basis until 1911. During this early period, the naval facility's contribution to the region's prosperity was not crucial, although rumors of its demise from 1908 on brought about psychological fears of economic disaster for the city.<sup>8</sup>

Both black and white population grew after the Civil War, the blacks increasing slowly at a greater rate until in 1900 they exceeded the white population by over 1,000.<sup>9</sup> One Escambia County historian noted that after the Civil War "many Negroes—thousands in fact—had come to Florida from bordering states; and Pensacola got more than its share."<sup>10</sup> Much of this migration into the area was caused by the increasing need for cheap labor to work in the railroads, in the lumber industries, and in the 1890s the opening up of naval stores industries which included several nearby turpentine camps. The latter jobs were universally avoided by white laborers. As the need for other lumbering workers and connected service jobs increased, the population by 1900 had returned the white element to a majority (9,182 whites, 8,561 blacks); the forty-five per cent increase in the white population was more than four times that of the blacks. In 1905, despite a resurgence of blacks (twenty-six per cent) since 1900, the white population maintained its dominance and continued to increase rapidly during the period to 1920. The blacks, on the other hand, began a decline which by 1910 brought them to a plateau of 10,000 where they remained throughout the next decade, further declining in the early twenties. Thus, by 1920, the white population held a two

---

8. *Pensacola's Navy Yard, 1528-1911* (Pensacola, 1967), 19-20. *Pensacola Journal*, various issues, 1908-1910.

9. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Population, I* (Washington, 1901), 441, 612; *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915* (Washington, 1918; reprint edition, New York, 1968). 7,775 Negroes to 6,312 whites.

10. Henry Clay Armstrong, ed., *History of Escambia County* (St. Augustine, 1930), 114.

to one majority (20,631-10,404).<sup>11</sup> It would appear that the early promise of Pensacola as an area for black progress and success had by 1910 become an illusion.

Another population factor in Pensacola's history is that of the presence of a small but relatively significant Creole population.<sup>12</sup> Many of these residents were of uncertain lineage, both as to origin and status. The successive Spanish, French, and English occupation of the Pensacola area had led to several strains of inter-mixture. The designation of such families in the city directory listings varies from year to year. Early editions include them in the total white population, later issues designate many in the "colored" sections.<sup>13</sup> However listed, most of these persons were established by 1900 in seemingly secure professional, proprietorial, artisan, and service positions. While the presence of this Creole factor may well have mitigated the presence of Negroes in the city at first, the eventual abolition of the term "Creole" from the directory by 1910 is one major indicator of the intensity of racial feelings at this juncture in Pensacola's history.

It is difficult to make absolute judgments regarding residential housing patterns over the period 1896 to 1920. The presence of the Creoles and their fluctuating designation as white or colored causes unusual checkerboard patterns to appear on early maps derived from the street guides and directories of householders. This pattern was suggestive of a greater integration of blacks and whites than originally thought possible. The memories of one elderly black resident, however, lent some support to an integrated period for middle class Negro families in limited sections in both the residential and business areas.

- 
11. *Twelfth Census, 1900, Population*, I, 612. U. S. Bureau of the Census *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Population*, II (Washington, 1922), 77.
  12. The interpretation of the term Creole as being of original French-Spanish lineage, with no native mixture, is not applicable to the use made by the Pensacola city directories. That definition is more in line with mulatto, or the mixture of the Spanish and French with the Negro population
  13. Pensacola city directories, 1886-1924, *passim*. Usefulness of city directories has been aided by such research as Peter R. Knights, "City Directories as Aids to Ante-Bellum Urban Studies: A Research Note," *Historical Methods Newsletter*, II (September 1969), 1-10. *Webb's Pensacola Directory* (New York, 1885); *Wiggin's Pensacola City Directory* (Columbus, Ohio, 1896, 1898, 1903); *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Pensacola Directory* (Jacksonville, Richmond, 1905 to date).

Several possible explanations for the appearance of this "integration" can be offered. The central section of Pensacola from the earliest permanent settlements in the sixteenth century through Florida's acquisition in 1821, had been inhabited by the three major colonial powers: Spain, France, and England. Such integration of population factors as Europeans, native Indians, and Negroes did take place on a moderate scale, and the early colonial years of the Seville Square area reflected this mix. The expansion into the peripheral areas by these people in the post-1821 period of urban growth followed the same pattern of white expansion. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, with the significant spurts of economic expansion (and increasing Negro population), Palafox Street from the wharf to Garden Street (and later to Wright Street) and its parallel north-south streets, emerged as the central business section— with the immediate peripheral streets developing as desirable "suburban" living areas. The older areas remained fairly stable with a mix of population factors. With economic expansion came greater utilization of "live-in" Negro servants, whose presence on "white" property accounted for some of the directory's integrated appearance of residential patterns in the older areas. These wharf area needs also account for a more cosmopolitan population due to the infusion of sailors and other commercial peoples from Europe. The "ladies of Zarragossa Street" were of mixed racial composition as well — contributing to that street's integrated quality.

Central business streets began early to reflect the concentration of Negro population: living space above and behind stores and along alleyways. The directory of householders in the city directories shows the intensification of Negro residential settlement along the railroad tracks which created a central path down the middle of Tarragona Street. The expansion in this area proceeded north along the tracks and eastward for six to eight blocks. Away from the tenement-loft nature of the business area, the houses were either small square one-room or the long-narrow "shot-gun barrel" variety typical of urban areas throughout the South. There was no congestion in these expansion areas. Householder listings in directories as late as 1920 indicate isolated Negro residences on the northernmost streets.

In Booker T. Washington's account of 1907, he noted that

half the black residents then owned their own homes, and, combined with the value of business property, the total taxable Negro property amounted to some \$450,000. While many of the homes were of the type previously described, some were, in Washington's words, "nicely built after the latest modern plans," and fifty-two were "two story houses of from eight to ten rooms."<sup>14</sup> A section in each of two of the three available annual trade editions of *The Florida Sentinel* proudly displays pictures of these substantial middle-class homes owned by local "colored" dignitaries— lawyers, doctors, and the newspaper editor.<sup>15</sup> These residences were built in still a third area of the city, slightly north and west of the main business district. As the town grew, there was a tendency for the more affluent, both black and white, to build these larger homes in an area just west of the central business street, constituting a professional office-residence combination. The isolated middle class Negro residents in this group, however, by 1920, were to be found even further west, another two or three blocks, and somewhat more north into what became a third distinct "colored" area. This ghetto came during the 1910s to include the major Negro business district. It is somewhat deceptive though to assert an "integrated" aspect, since the residences in these wealthier areas were widely spaced and close relationships possible to avoid. It was when the spaces began to be filled in by the expanding white population that the Negroes began to move into the "assigned" ghetto area.

Many of the Negro middle class during the latter years of the Progressive era and into the 1920s began settling some distance from the city's center, and even today (1973) a sizable number live in pleasant, comfortable homes in semi-integrated areas.<sup>16</sup> One factor, however, still marks their presence: some of the streets of this area— despite the good homes and nicely kept lawns and gardens— are unpaved. The paternal tolerance goes just so far in improvements even in the 1970s.

A similar mixed pattern also existed in the major business

---

14. Washington, *Negro in Business*, 231.

15. For example, Pensacola *Florida Sentinel* (annual trade edition), May 26, 1906.

16. This "semi" consists of peripheral streets which contain white residents in the process of being "displaced" by the widening out of the Negro community into the more expensive homes. Isolated examples of white liberals and of conservative older white residents are also present.

area of Pensacola. Desirable store locations along Palafox Street, stretching up from the waterfront for a mile, were open to Negroes as well as whites during the early period 1890-1910. The People's Drugstore and Pensacola Drug Store, both Negro pharmacies and ice cream parlors, were located on the favorable upper reaches of Palafox and were patronized by both whites and blacks. Sam Charles, the Negro "shoe king" of Pensacola, moved successively from the dock area up Palafox Street, as his repair and sales business expanded and grew more profitable from both a black and white clientele. Charles was the only one of the Negroes whose business lasted intact on the main street through the 1920s. Adjoining streets, both east and west, contained scattered Negro business and professional operations. The largest and oldest black grocery and furniture stores were located but one block east of the Palafox-Garden Street center. Except for Charles, all of these stores were eventually forced to move further north and west of the more desirable address into the clearly identified Negro areas. Thus, we find, for example, the People's Drugstore relocated at a DeVilliers Street address (the Negro business street) by 1916. H. G. Williams, the proprietor, must have noted the changing attitudes, for between 1910 and 1913 he established a branch of his drugstore at DeVilliers. By 1916 it was the only store. The same kind of removal took place with other professional and proprietorial people.

Because the labor opportunities between 1880 and 1906 were constantly expanding, Pensacola's Negro population had a greater chance at economic well-being. Throughout the period the primary job factor was as laboring hands in a variety of railroad, lumber, and sea industry-connected menial work. This steady increase in urban labor concentration reflected the general trend of the Negro movement away from agricultural pursuits. Escambia County had never been a large agricultural producing unit; the influx of Negroes after the Civil War came from the fields of southern Alabama and Mississippi. As the migration of blacks to the city began to decline from the middle of the first decade of this century, so did lumber and port employment. Job opportunities for Negroes decreased until about 1920-1924 when the remaining blacks were forced regardless of their skills into a menial labor work force, and these kinds of

workers began to increase at the expense of artisan categories.<sup>17</sup>

In 1902, Matthew Lewey, black editor of *The Florida Sentinel*, identified for an Atlanta University survey on the status of Negro artisans, 169 "leading Negro mechanics" in Pensacola. Included were ninety-five carpenters, nineteen painters, seven blacksmiths, twenty-three plasterers and bricklayers, five tailors, eight cigar makers, seven shoemakers, two tanners, and three cabinetmakers. Lewey further reported that these mechanics were "measurably holding their own." Indeed, carpenters and builders of both races worked side by side and received the same union wages.<sup>18</sup> This encouraging report, upon which Washington also probably drew, indicated good prospects and much of the decade gives evidence of growing numbers of skilled artisan Negroes. The picture after 1908-1910 was not as encouraging, and with but very few exceptions becomes increasingly gloomy for this *Negro* occupational grouping.

In such artisan jobs as blacks were able to make progress this trend was directly responsive to Pensacola's economic condition. Carpenters, for example, continued to increase in number, and the 1910 directory sample indicates approximately 170, almost double that of Lewey's report in 1902.<sup>19</sup> By 1913 the total number had decreased by twenty, and another thirty by 1916. In 1920 the sample reflects a return to an 1896 figure of approximately fifty Negro carpenters. Over the twenty-year span, job opportunities for carpenters rose considerably, especially in connection with wooden shipbuilding and urban construction needs. With the shift after 1910 to steel ships and a growing white population which included more skilled carpenters, many

- 
17. The analysis of Negro occupational opportunities is derived from a sample of Pensacola directories, 1896-1924. Each listing in the directory indicates occupation. More precise is the account of professional, artisan, and proprietorial factors due to the separate listings in a special classified section of the directories which are not sampled but used in their entirety. Allowing for the inaccuracies of the directory canvassing and editing, this source offers the most accurate occupational picture. The Alba M. Edwards' *Alphabetical Index of Occupations and Industries* (Washington, 1940) has been used throughout.
  18. "The Negro Artisan," *Atlanta University Publications*, II (Atlanta, 1902; reprint edition, New York, 1968), 112.
  19. These numbers should be held up against the following Pensacola Negro population figures: 1890- 7,775; 1906- 8,561; 1905- 10,712, *Third Census of State of Florida Taken in the Year 1905* (Tallahassee, 1906), 30; 1910- 10,214; 1920- 10,404. *Negro Population in the U.S. 1900-1915*, 768; *Fourteenth Census, 1920, Population*, II, 77.

black artisans migrated to the North, and Pensacola's Negro population began to decline after 1905. Less severe, but noticeable declines in job opportunities occurred in the bricklaying, cigarmaking, and painting crafts. Other artisan jobs remained either low, constant, or erratic within a very small (ten plus or minus) sampling range— indicating that only minimal inroads had been made by Negroes in those areas (e.g., shoe repair, seamstress, machinists).<sup>20</sup>

Proprietorial occupations hold a constant low figure. The two major jobs involved in this category were typical of urban Negro communities everywhere: grocers and butchers. While as many as twenty-three grocers were listed in the directory for both 1908-1909 and 1916, the figure had fluctuated from a low of fourteen in 1905, dropped in 1913, and again in 1920, but the differences are not overly significant in total numbers. But on detailed analysis, only three grocers of that total were consistently in business between 1910 and 1920. The others remained in business for an average of only one to four years, with the largest number in the former group. While the amount of capital required to establish a grocery stock was small and only a room or shed was required to begin operations, the managerial ability to sustain them appears to have been lacking in the Negro community despite concerted attention to encourage "Buy Black" programs.<sup>21</sup> The most sustained businesses of this type were those established early, some in the 1890s, and whose growth eventually included a wholesale branch to supply the other transitory retail establishments.

The most prominent of the service occupations, barbers, also received setbacks due to depressed conditions and general decline. Essentially, the Creole occupation, in that the more successful and continually operating barbers were Creoles, this job retained a fluctuation which resembled that of the grocers. As with the latter, the 1908-1909 economic downswing led to a small decrease (twenty-three down to nineteen); the same period, however, found a great increase of white barbers, a twenty-four

20. P. B. Warthman and J. R. Green, "Black Workers in the New South, 1865-1915," in Nathan I. Huggins, *et al.*, *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience* (New York, 1971), 47-69. Warthman and Green assert: "In Pensacola, Florida, skilled work was about evenly divided between the races." While this was valid in 1902, it was not true in 1910, 1916, 1920, or since.

21. Pensacola *Florida Sentinel*, May 26, 1906.

per cent increase over the ten-year span since 1900. Thus, if as the newspaper claimed there had been no real economic repercussions from the national decline in 1907-1909 for the white community, it did have an influence on black economic conditions in Pensacola.<sup>22</sup> The war years temporarily increased the Negro jobholders in barbering and grocers, but again, influenced by the economic downswing of 1920-1921-1922, the number of barbers sharply decreased from a high of twenty-three in 1916-1917 to fifteen in 1920, and thirteen in 1924. The latter drop, however, was matched by a similar pattern in the white community, indicating a fuller effect of the war and recession on the total Pensacola economy. In all, over the years, Negro barbers, restaurateurs, clothes cleaners, drivers or draymen, fishermen, gardeners, and similar workers, did not fare too badly in years of economic quietude, but in years of economic hardship the black workers suffered as Negroes did in other urban centers.

Constants over this period were alone to be found in the professional and semi-professional class. Black physicians averaged four over the period 1900-1913, temporarily increasing to seven in 1916, and then returning to the average by 1924. At least two of these doctors over the entire span were hometown success stories—having attended Tuskegee and then Meharry Medical School and returned to establish local practices.<sup>23</sup> Lawyers were less successful for reasons not wholly clear.<sup>24</sup> The early directories list two to three, but by 1910 there are no listings for Negro attorneys. In three months of 1909, two of the lawyers were convicted of criminal offenses, and one, presumably for not renewing a license, was denied the right to practice in the city.<sup>25</sup> Another, chose to leave and go to Tampa, where he became active in Florida State Republican and Progressive Party councils in 1912 and in asserting black demands.<sup>26</sup> In 1913 one attorney

22. *Pensacola Journal*, January 7, 1910.

23. *Bliss Quarterly*, III (January 1897), 138. One of these doctors, Charles Sunday, was a member of an established and respected Creole family, Washington, *Negro in Business*, 233-34.

24. Kelly Miller, "Professional and Skilled Occupations," *The Negro's Progress in Fifty Years* (Philadelphia, 1913), 7. Miller suggests that the lawyer's need to operate in a white court system was inhibiting, and Negro lawyers could not guarantee fair and equal justice for their black clients.

25. *Pensacola Journal*, September 24, 25, November 27, 1909.

26. G. N. Green, "Republicans, Bull Moose, and Negroes in Florida, 1912," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLIII (October 1964), 155, 160-63, This suggests that Tampa was more tolerant of its Negro citizens.

appears again, but from 1916 to 1924 there are no listings. It would appear from the large number of Negro criminal acts reported in the white press, that there would have been enough business to keep more than two or three attorneys active. But just as obvious is that they were either discouraged from practicing or forced to leave by such tactics as may be implicit in the *Pensacola Journal's* reports of legal harassment in 1909. Whatever local legal assistance that the black community needed after 1910 came only from white attorneys.

Teaching, which since the Civil War had been the major professional direction of many blacks, also remained fairly constant in terms of employment. Because of the declining black population, however, and its leveling off after 1910, the number of black schools was curtailed. From six black schools in 1903 to eight in 1910, the number declined to seven in 1913 and to six by 1920. With the stabilization of black population, the number of Negro teachers declined, from a high of approximately fifty to sixty in 1910, there was a decrease by 1920 of from ten to twenty teachers and the start of a renewed demand in 1924 with the addition of another school at that time. Salaries of black teachers averaged \$120 less than that of white teachers, while their student load would have approximated anywhere from 130 to 170 students per teacher— if all of the school age Negro children attended school.<sup>27</sup>

An indication of a strong middle class orientation among some Pensacola blacks was the presence of at least two private Negro schools during the period 1898-1920. One was church affiliated; the other was independently supported through tuition and private contributions. Other opportunities for Negroes were available in Pensacola with the advent in 1908 of a normal and industrial school, where "the trades of cooking, sewing and the study of agriculture were taught."<sup>28</sup> Supported by both black and white contributions, this school strongly reflected the Booker

27. *Greater Pensacola*, II (January 1913), 1.

	White		Negro	
	1904-05	1911-12	1904-05	1911-12
Enrollment	1,806	2,268	1,097	1,371
Teachers	45	75	22	28
Salary (avg.)	\$350	\$420	\$230	\$300

28. *Pensacola Journal*, January 17, 1909.

T. Washington philosophy as evidenced by a graduation speech of 1908 which emphasized manual labor: "Education of the head (the speechmaker asserted) increases wants and so makes man that much poorer, but education of the hand increases the supply and therefore makes man richer."<sup>29</sup> On the same occasion there was an admonition from a white YMCA director that Negroes must prove their worth and rise above "the shiftless and ignorant, or the educated and selfish members of your own race that do you real harm."<sup>30</sup> That the Tuskegee orientation should exist among Pensacola blacks was a result of both its proximity and the presence of an important segment of Tuskegee graduates in the professional, craftsman, and proprietorial ranks. On the occasion of Booker T. Washington's visit to Pensacola in 1912, he was entertained by the Tuskegee alumni, numbering at that time fifty persons.<sup>31</sup> The city seemed well served by the Alabama institute, possibly providing the Pensacola Negro student with a realistic academic goal.

The first and only Negro undertaker in Pensacola until about 1910 was an example of the Horatio Alger syndrome that permeated so much of Washington's philosophy. Wade Hampton Harvey's story is also illustrative of the movement of Negroes to urban areas and the expanding economic and social opportunities afforded by such a move. Born to slave parents in McComb, Mississippi, in 1857, little is known about his first twenty-five years except that he probably lived and worked on a farm. Coming to Pensacola in 1883, he secured a job as a grocery clerk. He next became the conveyor of mail from the railroad depot to the post office. With some daring and small savings he married in 1884, and the following year opened up the first undertaking establishment in Pensacola. His success made him one of the leading Negro businessmen and community leaders. On his death in 1910, he was buried in St. Michael's Cemetery—an integrated cemetery from its beginnings in the colonial period.<sup>32</sup> When Harvey died, his business was sold to another black, whose family retains ownership today. The funeral enter-

29. *Ibid.*, May 27, 1908.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Pensacola Florida Sentinel*, May 26, 1912.

32. Interview with Mrs. Corinne Jones, Pensacola, April 12, 1970. Mrs. Jones was Harvey's foster-daughter. A segregated cemetery began operation within the time period under discussion.

prise was a wide open one for Harvey in 1885, and because of its uniqueness he received the black trade almost without exception. His foster-daughter could remember a comfortable existence that he provided.<sup>33</sup> This type of business success story is repeated in a number of other cases.

The expanding port facilities provided other opportunities for enterprising young men, to even those who were "colored." Such was the case of Sam Charles who rose from being a dock-porter to repairing shoes for sailors, and finally to operating the largest shoe repair and shoe sales store in Pensacola. Beginning in a small shop on the Palafox wharf in 1893, thirty-six years later, the prosperous business was still located on Palafox Street near Ferdinand Plaza— a most desirable site and quite alone as a Negro-owned enterprise on that street. Charles's success became one of the National Negro Business League Convention's heroic tales.<sup>34</sup> Harvey and Charles had seized upon an economic service required by a growing populace both white and black and made it work: Harvey in the black community, and Charles drawing his clientele from both the white and black populations.

One last case that serves to tie in the Creole factor is that of John Sunday. A veteran of the Civil War, Sunday worked to gain respected economic and social status, first as a mechanic in the navy-yard and then as a customs inspector for the port of Pensacola. For several years during Reconstruction he served in the Florida legislature, and in 1878-1881 he was alderman for the city. Putting his talents to work in real estate and construction, Sunday was reputed by Washington in 1906 to be worth at least \$125,000. He was also instrumental in organizing a veterans's group and served as commander of the post for several years.<sup>35</sup> Sunday's success and apparent acceptance by the white community allowed his family to achieve some security and status in the early Progressive period. The building contracting business continued to flourish until the 1920s and several relatives benefited from its existence.<sup>36</sup> But even this

33. *Ibid.*

34. For accounts of Charles's progress, see J. H. Harmon, Jr., "The Negro as a Local Businessman," *Journal of Negro History*, XIV (April 1929), 133; Washington, *Negro in Business*, 235.

35. F. E. Washington, "Pensacola's Colored People," *Bliss Quarterly*, III (January 1897), 137-40; Washington, *Negro in Business*, 236.

36. His son's listing was changed by 1924; he was no longer designated as "contractor," but as a "carpenter."

well established family, with its solid financial base, showed evidence of a decline in position and substance between 1900 and 1920. As the family increased, or came into the working force, a larger number of menial laborers, baymen, and cooks appear in the family ranks along with only the occasional teacher or carpenter. Especially was this true after 1910. It was also during this first decade that Sunday's physician son left Pensacola, but the reason for his departure cannot be ascertained. The family had obviously suffered if measured by the occupational status indicators.

There was present in Pensacola a local branch of the National Negro Business League. The booster nature of this league chapter was aided considerably by the active participation of the Sentinel's editor, Matthew M. Lewey, on the executive committee of the National League. The convenience of having the major Negro newspaper behind its work was evident in the issuance of annual "Trade Editions," which attempted to show the great advances being made by Negro businesses in Pensacola. Of the three extant issues the first two (1904 and 1906) are almost identical in nature and content.<sup>37</sup> Many of the same Negro businesses are highlighted, and emphasis is placed on the few very successful men: doctors, lawyers, and grocers. The trade issues were at the same time an indicator of rising expectations as well as possible delusion. Heavily devoted to statistics extolling Pensacola's general trade posture, and with numerous white business advertisers, only the editorial page and several following pages detailed the Negro success stories previously mentioned, and there were very few advertisers from the Negro business world. The impressiveness of Lewey's trade editions (and probably his regular weekly) might have led to more optimistic prospects for many in the black community than were merited by actual conditions.

If nothing else these editions were eloquent tributes to the Booker T. Washington philosophy as fulfilled in the self-education and economic progress of Lewey. Coming to Pensacola

---

37. Pensacola *Florida Sentineel* (annual trade edition), May 1904; Pensacola *Florida Sentinel* (annual trade edition), May 1906. Copies of the regular weekly paper are not known to exist, nor issues of another Negro paper, *Pensacola Brotherhood* (ca. 1910-1916) which conceivably took a more militant view of Negro rights. The latter is listed in the Pensacola directories for the years cited.

in 1895 from successful publishing ventures in Gainesville, Lewey brought a high level journalism to the Negro community in Pensacola.<sup>38</sup> While always stressing black pride and "indomitable perseverance," he edited and published the *Sentinel*, but he also did a multitude of other printing jobs. His staff was experienced, and all his top people had been educated at Tuskegee or Morris Brown College. Lewey saw and fulfilled the need to put the Negro into the total Pensacola economic perspective, and he sought to boost the city's general progress and potential. Significantly, Lewey not only served on the executive council of the National Negro Business League, but as local, and then, state president of the Florida State League. In the latter capacity he arranged for a tour of North Florida by Booker T. Washington in 1912 to boost black business gains in the state. This trip, the Washington philosophy, and Tuskegee activities made up the major portion of the third extant annual edition.

The general occupational picture for Negroes in Pensacola was, during the early part of the period under discussion, quite favorable. There is no evidence in the racist white press of large numbers of idle, shiftless, unemployed Negroes. Indeed, evidence exists of the fears white business had of a shortage of Negro labor occurring to the detriment of the city.<sup>39</sup> In several instances these fears resulted in active efforts by the city to obtain European immigrants to replace the evident exodus of blacks.<sup>40</sup> In still another case a Louisiana Negro was charged with enticing laborers away from the German-American Lumber Company at nearby Millville. This was a serious enough offense to merit a sixty-day jail sentence and a fine not to exceed \$150.00.<sup>41</sup> A Negro reaction to persecution in the form of mass exodus was also reported: "This afternoon the Negroes began leaving town, and when night came they left in large numbers. It is feared that there will not be enough to operate the mills here and serious inconvenience may result."<sup>42</sup>

---

38. J. Garland Penn, *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors* (Springfield, Mass., 1891), 170-73. This account of Lewey mentions his active politics, perhaps accounting for his move to Pensacola.

39. *Pensacola Journal*, December 19, 1911.

40. *Ibid.*, March 31, 1907; August 15, 1909; *Greater Pensacola*, II (March 1913), 2.

41. *Pensacola Journal*, April 30, 1909.

42. *Ibid.*, April 26, 1908.

White reaction to the Negro move was to the inconvenience; blacks were fleeing from the terror of a lynching. Neither their pay nor other conditions of work were equal to the whites, but the shortage of labor at the mills and turpentine camps, as at Millville, due to the general decline of Negro population, had at least provided some assurance of work to those who remained. But such incidents as the lynching motivated many blacks to believe that conditions were better elsewhere than in Pensacola. Lynchings had not been common in the city and its environs, although the *Pensacola Journal* reported those that occurred elsewhere. It would appear that the original and continued exodus occurred because of the basic factors of economic decline as well as the intensification of white racist pressures.

Between the disastrous hurricane of 1906 and 1910, evidence developed that William D. Chipley's prediction of 1877, of the exhaustion of the forests in twenty-five years was apparently coming true.<sup>43</sup> The leading booster magazine, *The Pensacolian*, gave voice to this growing fear: "It is generally conceded by public opinion that these industries [lumber and naval stores] are fast passing away."<sup>44</sup> For the previous year, and for the next, *The Pensacolian* stressed the historical and contemporary ineptitude in attracting diversified industry to the area. Indeed, by the end of 1909 and into 1910, the magazine emphasized the need for an agricultural base for Pensacola's economy: "There is a future to West Florida and South Alabama far better than the [one] timber and naval stores have given it. We speak of truck farming and horticulture. In this surely, lies the future prosperity of this section."<sup>45</sup> Despite these indications, the paper claimed that the lumber industry was holding its own. But to do this the lumber companies were drawing from timber stands as far east as DeFuniak Springs and from South Alabama. It was becoming unprofitable to go much further and still retain Pensacola as an effective port. Thus to hold its own really meant a decline. While limited profitable lumbering was to continue into the late 1920s, the apex of this industry came with the World War I period. Reforestation was a practice not

---

43. Chipley, *Pensacola*, 20.

44. *Pensacolian*, I (August 1909), 9.

45. *Ibid.*

yet held by the companies.<sup>46</sup> Some smaller industries took up some of the slack: a small steel plant, a brewery, and a major contributor to white employment was a rapidly expanding fishing industry— an occupational area in which very few Pensacola Negroes were ever engaged.

The final blow to Negro employment factors came with the severe cut in lumber exports to Europe with the outbreak of World War I. But even before that, the entire local lumber industry had been shaken severely by the failure of an English lumber import firm. The First National Bank of Pensacola, which had over extended itself on loans connected with this English company, also failed. In doing so it brought down several of the largest timber families. This incident, followed by the beginning of the war, was a serious blow to Pensacola's port activity.<sup>47</sup> If one can judge from the editorials of the *Pensacola Journal* in 1920, the port at that time had still not recovered, and the prospects were dim unless some drastic municipal action was taken.<sup>48</sup>

Added to the declining lumber industry was the closing in 1910-1911 of the naval base. Thus, Pensacola in 1910-1913 was threatened by economic distress. The touting by the press that the opening of the Panama Canal would solve all problems for Pensacola became in 1914 just another booster's dream. The white population, however, continued to grow, while black population receded further. All Negro employment factors fell off seriously between 1910 and 1920-1921 when once again laborers, domestics and service-connected jobs increased. The categories of craftsmen, proprietors, and operatives never again rose. The strong, healthy middle class largely built around these latter occupations declined as a result. Only the professionals were able to hold their own. The business failures, the port's decline, and the closing of the naval base were greater blows to the black community than to the white. Even the reopening of the naval base as a naval air station in 1916 did not help the black employment picture. When the naval base closed in 1911,

---

46. A. Stuart Campbell, *Studies in Forestry Resources in Florida*, II. *The Lumber Industry*. University of Florida, Economic Series, I (May 1932), 23, 50-51.

47. Interview with Mrs. E. P. Nickinson, Pensacola, March 22, 1970. Mrs. Nickinson was the daughter of one of Pensacola's biggest shippers at the time of the failure.

48. *Pensacola Journal*, July 24, 29, August 2, 6, 26, 1920.

Moses White's thousands of loaves of bread ceased to emerge from the ovens of that enterprising Negro baker; and both Sylvester Campbell's and Benjamin Dolphin's businesses in groceries and general merchandise came to an end. If there were only three Negro merchants who directly lost by the base's demise, the total loss of revenue to the entire city, black and white, had effects most notable on the black's ability to survive such set-backs.

The increased entry of whites into the city was also reflected in rather direct evidences of loss of jobs ordinarily considered safely "Negro." In an editorial comment in the 1912 Annual Trade Edition, M. M. Lewey spoke out regarding such an occurrence: "The colored waiter has a fine chance to 'make good' while the frenzied agitators are struggling with the hotel owners. When the black man secures his place in the dining rooms of the best hostelrys, he is simply taking back the place that belongs to him by the logic of events. He need feel no compunction about being a 'strike-breaker' for the unions have no compunction about denying him the right to earn his bread in any of the callings they control. The Negro has no use for the labor unions for the single purpose that the labor unions have no use for him."<sup>49</sup>

Even in the "safe" employment areas, the Negro was threatened with the bare fact of the increased need of whites for employment. The Negro Pensacola unions to which the black had turned and had supported during the early Progressive years (five were listed in 1903 and 1905, including the Baymen's Protective Association, a carpenters' and joiners's local, and others) had disappeared by 1924.<sup>50</sup> Even the job of bayman, again another job which had been left largely to the blacks, was as obsolete by 1920 as the wooden lumber ships on which these particular jobs were prominent. Thus, even the technological revolution in shipbuilding brought disaster to the Negro. The continuance and growth of the "white only" stevedore local closed the port to the lowest ranking dock jobs, and thus closed further wharf employment to the Negroes.

49. Pensacola *Florida Sentinel* (annual trade edition), May 26, 1912.

50. Evidence of Negro union support for striking white union members can be seen in the streetcar strike of 1908. Wayne Flynt, "Pensacola Labor Problems and Political Radicalism, 1908," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLIII (April 1965), 321.

The cutback in the lumber industry, 1910-1920, and along with it the related naval stores industry, and the dock jobs effectively cut off, did not leave the Negro much choice. It was not an empty admonition from Booker T. Washington when he spoke to over 1,000 assembled Pensacola Negroes in 1912, that a return to the security of the land was in order. While this was a part of Washington's usual southern speeches, his words were falling on the ears of those beginning to feel the economic pressures. "While we may have disadvantages in other directions," Washington stated, "we should . . . bear in mind that the soil in Florida draws no color line. . . the rain knows no color line. The sun draws no color line."<sup>51</sup> While the speech reflected part of Washington's general retrenching tactics, it would not have been impossible for Lewey to have informed Washington as to the Negro's growing employment plight in Pensacola. If it were not back to the land, then the Negro worker must leave the city or accept only menial jobs— and even those were in short supply. It may be conjectured that Lewey's arranging of Washington's trip to Florida in 1912 was expressly to give direct encouragement and heart to the Negro community. It did not help, but there were few other avenues open to leaders of the Pensacola black community,

Beyond a few isolated instances of Jim Crow violations on streetcars after 1905, there was little in the newspapers concerning segregated facilities and conveyances. About the time of the beginning of the declining black population in Pensacola the revised Florida state general statutes were being passed. These statutes included laws against co-habitation, separate colleges and universities (1905), miscegenation (1906), separate jail cells (1909), and separate but equal accommodations on common carriers (1909), on electric cars (1907), and in separate waiting rooms and ticket windows (1907).<sup>52</sup> One other controlling factor may well have been that of the occupational license tax.<sup>53</sup> While the latter was presumably not initially intended to be specifically anti-Negro, it placed the occupationally marginal, which included many Negro proprietors, at a decided disadvantage. This kept the members engaged in such licensed

51. Pensacola *Florida Sentinel*, May 26, 1912.

52. Pauli Murray, *States' Laws on Race and Color* (Cincinnati, 1951), 77.

53. Pensacola *Florida Sentinel*, June, 1904.

occupations as shoemakers, restaurateurs, and barbers, to a relatively small number. While the white primary had begun at the turn of the century, the poll tax was not imposed in Florida until after 1910.<sup>54</sup> Reports of heavy Negro registration in the *Pensacola Journal* in 1908 were not again repeated, but at the same time there began to appear urgings to disenfranchise the Negro.<sup>55</sup> The specter of Negro political power appeared as a real threat in the election of 1908 as a result of the streetcar strike of that year which threatened to split the white labor vote. Socialist appeals in Pensacola created a real alternative to the normally Democratic union vote, when that party did not seem to be responding to the union's grievances. The *Pensacola Journal* "raised the spectrum [*sic*] of Negro domination if white laborers split their vote between several parties."<sup>56</sup> Despite the declining Negro population, there remained in 1908 a sufficient potential of black power. The white establishment felt threatened, and this added to the psychological fears which were already evident in the economic sphere with declining lumber potentials and rumors of the closing of the naval base.

Several major events, then, had strong influence on the growth of Pensacola, in general, and on the Negro status in particular. The hurricane of 1906 left the dock area of the city devastated, and it was not fully restored to full capability for many years. While trade continued, the advent of steel ships and their peculiar port demands made it difficult for Pensacola to compete with cities like Mobile and New Orleans whose state, municipal, and private interests insisted on improving their port.<sup>57</sup> The editorial complaints of the *Pensacola Journal* in 1920 clearly pointed up the lack of interest in creating modern dock facilities. The advent of the naval air station in 1916 and its decidedly favorable impact on Pensacola's economy may well have diverted major business interests away from shipping.<sup>58</sup> Certainly, the decrease in commercial port activity

54. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York, 1955), 67-68.

55. *Pensacola Journal*, April 18, 1908.

56. Flynt, "Pensacola Labor Problems," 331.

57. An area of needed investigation is whether Florida's state and national representation in Tallahassee and Washington was neglectful of Pensacola's interests, and whether Alabama's Washington delegation had greater influence with the Army Corps of Engineers and the rivers and harbors committee.

58. H. D. Harden and K. T. Ford, "Increased Naval Activity at Pensacola,

meant a cutback in job opportunities at every level— especially for blacks.

The closing of the naval base in 1911, coming as it did at the beginning of the decline in the timber industry and at the end of the national and local economic downswing of 1908-1910, may well have discouraged business expansion of any real nature. Further discouragement came with the failure of the First National Bank in 1913 and the attendant losses to major timber shipping interests and the unfulfilled promise of the Panama Canal. With the severe curtailment in exports in the war years, it is little wonder that white Pensacola turned her eyes to the naval air station in 1914-1916 for its economic salvation. All of these factors contributed to declining opportunities for blacks, especially as the white population continued to increase. The alluring prospects of a better existence in northern cities— as advertised in such locally available papers as the *Chicago Defender*— and the Booker T. Washington call for a return to the farm, provided possible “escape hatches” from the increased racist pressures and economic hardships. Available evidence does not show a heavy return of Pensacola Negroes to the soil.

The stability of the Negro population, 1905-1920, indicates that a plateau of acceptability had been reached at a little less than fifty per cent of the total city population. This margin increases until a twenty-five per cent Negro population factor is established and maintained. Major northward migrations of general black population confirms the failure of such cities as Pensacola to measure up to early Negro aspirations. Washington's designation of Pensacola as “typical” of Negro accomplishment in the period 1880-1906 is somewhat of an understatement. Compared statistically to the total United States black population and the proportion of professionals and businessmen, Pensacola emerges as an example of a strong and positive Negro condition. But this position remained only until the increasing urban in-migration of whites, many with specialized craft skills, caused the fairly equal population factor of 1890-1905 to become disproportionately favorable to the whites. This brought to the

---

Florida, 1914-19, and Its Influence Upon Pensacola's Economy and Culture.” (graduate paper, Department of History, University of West Florida, Pensacola.)

white community far greater power in the form of segregated unions and majority support to exclusive white businesses. The population balance which had allowed for accommodation of all races, and thus a measure of Negro social acceptance, was permanently destroyed in the period 1905-1910. The colored population— both black and “Creole”— never really recovered from this decline. Unlike many other cities of the South that continue to show an increase of Negroes in their population, although the total percentage of increase usually declines, Pensacola’s black population showed a slight decrease from the plateau between 1910 and 1920, and registered a negative growth percentage.<sup>59</sup>

Negro prospects of an enlarging economic and social status as prescribed by Booker T. Washington in 1906, slowly, but surely, were dashed in the “death” of Pensacola, 1906-1920. Town fathers and business interests who presided over the decline were hesitant and indecisive over the direction in which Pensacola could best recoup its timber and shipping losses. The advent of the naval air station seemed a solution, and this base was carefully nurtured and did begin to encourage business expansion after 1916, especially in the services area. But any employment and wages to be accrued from that development went to the increasing white urban population. As always in the case of economic squeeze, Negroes were the first to feel the pinch. They had lost timber and shipping-connected jobs, and what remained was absorbed by the white workers. Only the most menial labor and domestic employment remained open.

Relative prosperity, expanding business, and the presence of a once respected “Creole” citizen group had given early hope to a rising economic and social condition for Negroes in Pensacola, but the hopes of the black community in Pensacola were not great enough to survive the pressure of the expanding white population and the changing nature of the city’s economy.

---

59. William Rossiter, *Increase of Population in the United States, 1910-1920*, Census Monographs I (Washington, 1922), 124.