

**From *The American Negro: His Past and Future*, by Paul B. Barringer
(Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1900)**

[This is a much abridged version, with commentary, from an online page,
<https://twain.lib.virginia.edu/wilson/barringer.html>.

The entire publication is available upon request.]

[Dr. Barringer, Chairman of the Faculty at the University of Virginia, originally presented this essay at the 20 February 1900 meeting of the Tri-State Medical Association in Charleston, S.C. According to the Preface, he was asked to speak on "the influence of heredity upon the negro" at the conference. The Association then voted unanimously to print the lecture and send copies "to all the medical societies in the South." Barringer's essay addresses itself to what he repeatedly calls "the negro problem" facing the South. It deals mainly with history and anecdote, but creates a scientific context for its ideas by beginning with the "biological axiom" that "the ontogeny is the repetition of the phylogeny," or, as he rephrases it for his lay reader, "the life history of any individual . . . will tend to conform to the lines of ancestral traits."]

Let us apply this biological axiom to the human race, taking as our example of that race, the Southern negro. In advance, I will here state what I hope to show. I will endeavor to show that the American negro is the resultant of a combination of forces, each one of which can be isolated and analysed. I will show from the study of his racial history (phylogeny) that his late tendency to return to barbarism is as natural as the return of the sow that is washed to her wallowing in the mire. I will show that the ages of degradation under which he was formed and the fifty centuries of historically recorded savagery with which he came to us can not be permanently influenced by one or two centuries of enforced correction if the correcting force be withdrawn. . . .

Fortunately for us, experience (history) has shown that these savage traits can be held down, and we have seen that if held down long enough, they will be bred out. In this one fact lies the hope of the South.

[His larger argument addresses itself to the rise of criminality among younger blacks, and advocates a legal return to the system of white overseeing and discipline that can provide the same check on "savage" tendencies as slavery formerly provided. To give this argument the appearance of scientific objectivity, Barringer begins with the ancestry of the Southern "negro" -- i.e. the tribes of the west coast of Africa. According to him, the aboriginal condition of the African displays the hereditary cause of crime in America. It's interesting to compare MT's character of Tom to the type Barringer describes. It's also probably unnecessary to state that Barringer had never been to Africa, and that the "Africa" he describes exists only in the racist mind.]

A feature of west coast life, that to my mind was its most important feature, was the absence of all restraint either parental, social, or governmental. The child, the boy, and the

man followed the basest of passions, with the results dishonesty and robbery, cruelty and murder, lust and rape. Among all men we have many that are dishonest, yet there are few robberies; lust is, among the depraved, as natural as thirst, yet there is but little rapine, and there is, moreover, everywhere inherent cruelty, and yet there is little murder. With the savage, however, there is no self-control, and dishonesty gives theft, anger gives murder, and desire rape. This state of being is pathognomonic of savagery; and the African fills the bill.

[Of course, readers of Pudd'nhead Wilson can argue that Tom's immorality results from his training, not his inherent nature, and thus that he is corrupted by slavery. To Barringer, however, slavery was ultimately much better for the "negro" than freedom.]

And now let us turn to the influence of this "peculiar institution" upon the negro. Although he came to us a savage, with fifty generations of unalloyed savagery behind him, two hundred and fifty years of close association, as slave and master, produced changes in the race, the like of which has never been seen before or since.

Whatever the evils of slavery may have been, and I have no desire to minimize them, the general result was at the close of the war some 4,000,000 negroes, who were in their average morality and character so far ahead of any other 4,000,000 or even 1,000,000 of that race to be found elsewhere on the face of the earth that they were not in the same class. . . . No, my friends, we can boldly declare the old Southern house servant, male or female, as brought up in the better class of families, was the flood tide product in negro character. It seems strange that a woman of Mrs. Stowe's intelligence, should not have seen the paradoxical side of a work written in criticism of a civilization which produced an "Uncle Tom" and a "Topsy" from savage cannibals in less than five generations.

[Even "field hands" (according to this very prejudiced but ostensibly empirical account) were "civilized" by slavery. Since emancipation, however, the "negro" has been reverting to the type Barringer described earlier.]

Thirty-five years have passed since the negro changed from the condition of a slave to that of a freedman. In every part of the South, it is the opinion of every man of unbiased mind, that the second generation is infinitely worse than the first. So patent is this that I would be tempted to doubt the sanity of any man having fair opportunities to judge, who declared the reverse to be true. The question for us to-day, then, and the question of questions for the South, is, "What is the cause of the change and what can be done to remedy the evil?" The first thing is to seek out the truth, however unpalatable it may be, and in my opinion the truth is very simple. The young negro of the South, except where descended from parents of exceptional character and worth, is reverting through hereditary forces to savagery. Fifty centuries of savagery in the blood cannot be held down by two centuries of forced good behavior if the controlling influences which held down his savagery are withdrawn as they have been in this case. The language and forms of civilization may be maintained, but the savage nature remains. It is the nature that makes the criminal and imperils a civilization, not the language, the skin or the clothes.