

"The school houses are crowded, and the people are clamorous for more"

The results of emancipation in the United States of America. By a committee of the American freedmen's union commission. (New York, c. 1867), pp. 28–31.

Emerging from their bondage, the negroes in the very beginning [manifested](#) the utmost eagerness for instruction, and their hunger was met by a corresponding readiness on the part of the people of the North to make provision for it.... No co-operation or sympathy was extended to these educational efforts by the Southern people. On the contrary, they had to contend, at first, against their deep-seated prejudices, and bitter [hostility](#). They were regarded as an unwarrantable [encroachment](#) upon their peculiar rights, and [derided](#) as an absurd attempt to elevate the negro. The school-houses were, in several instances burned, and school teachers mobbed and driven away, and, even until a very late period the teachers were unable to secure [board](#) in [reputable](#) white families, and were subjected to every kind of [taunt](#) and [ridicule](#). "Nigger teacher" was one of the most [opprobrious epithets](#) that the Southern vocabulary furnished....

The educational progress has been very rapid and very marked. The first schools were held in deserted churches, in abandoned hospitals, in private houses temporarily occupied by military authority, in old sheds, under the shadow of a tree, and even, in one case, in a dismantled bombproof. The books, in the beginning, were little better than the buildings, the schools depending largely upon voluntary contributions of old and sometimes [obsolete](#) school books from the North. In many of the larger places the Freedmen's schools are now regularly graded, beginning with the primary and ascending to the normal. The teachers are, many of them, among the best in the country, and some of the schools are not inferior to those of the Northern towns and cities. In the District of Columbia, the colored schools, fostered and sustained by the voluntary contributions of the friends of the freedmen, are equal to any in the land.

The effect of these schools upon the public [sentiment](#) of the South has been very marked. Many Southern church organizations have taken up the work of education, at least so far as to pass resolutions in favor of its prosecution. Probably only the lack of means prevents their vigorous participation. In several of the States, laws have been passed looking to the establishment of the free school system. In the District of Columbia, the school tax on the colored population is henceforth to be appropriated for their schools. The same is true in the States of Maryland and of Florida. In Tennessee, Missouri and Western Virginia, a free and impartial system of education has been provided for by law, but for want of necessary funds has not yet been put in

efficient operation. In the Carolinas, leading men are working for the establishment of a similar system. In Georgia, the colored people have formed themselves into an educational association, with the purpose of establishing schools in every county in the State; in other regions of the South, individuals have contributed of their means for the maintenance of schools in special localities; while in the very States and towns where, a year ago, a “nigger school marm” was the object of [undissembled contempt](#), applications are continually made for situations as teachers by Southern people desirous of engaging in this work. Wherever these schools have been longest established, there the prejudice between North and South is least [virulent](#); and wherever they have not yet gone, there this sectional prejudice still continues with [unabated](#) vigor. The eagerness of the negroes to learn can scarcely be overstated. The school houses are crowded, and the people are [clamorous](#) for more.

These schools are of four kinds — the day school, for children; the night school, (often conducted by the same teachers,) for adults; the industrial school, where women and children are taught sewing and other household arts; and Sunday schools. The interest of the freedmen is indicated by the facts that the average attendance is fully equal to that of the whites in the Northern cities; that the pupils beg that the work may not be intermitted for the necessary summer vacation; that, ordinarily, suspension from the privileges of the school is the severest punishment which the teacher needs to inflict; and that out of their poverty the colored people have made so large contributions for the purchase of land, the erection of buildings, and the support of teachers. More than half the schools in the South are sustained in part by the freedmen....

As you read

The American Freedmen’s Union Commission was organized in the North and its members raised money, organized schools, recruited teachers, and collected textbooks to educate African Americans in the South. At the end of the Civil War, many people in the North wanted to help rebuild the South and to assist Southerners — white and black — in building a new life. As one of the largest northern organizations working in the South, the Commission worked closely with the U.S. Government’s Freedmen’s Bureau.

This excerpt from a Commission pamphlet describes the work of the Commission and the desire of formerly enslaved African Americans for education.

Questions to consider

1. Where did the Commission set up schools? What buildings did they use?
2. How did the Commission believe that schools for African Americans would be funded in the future?
3. What were the conditions of the schools?
4. What types of classes did the Commission offer at its schools?

5. What dangers did the teachers and students face? Why do you think there was hostility towards these schools?
6. The Commission found that not all white southerners were hostile to their activities. Where was the Commission successful and what did they believe accounted for that success?
7. Why do you think formerly enslaved people were so eager to attend school?

Credits

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The Freedmen's Bureau

I wish you could look in upon my school of one hundred and thirty scholars. There are bright faces among them bent over puzzling books: a, b, and p are all one now. But these small [perplexities](#) will soon be conquered, and the conqueror, perhaps, feel as grand as a promising scholar of mine, who had no sooner mastered his A B C's, when he conceived that he was persecuted on account of his knowledge. He preferred charges against the children for ill-treatment, concluding with the [emphatic](#) assurance that he knew a "little something now."

I have called mine the Lincoln School.

We learn from the record kept at the Freedmen's Bureau, that there are two thousand two hundred children here. Some six or seven hundred are yet out of school. The freedmen are interested in the education of their children. You will find a few who have to learn and appreciate what will be its advantage to them and theirs. The old spirit of the system, "I am the master and you are the slave," is not dead in Georgia. For instance, the people who live next door owned slaves. They are as poor as that renowned church mouse, yet they must have their servant. Employer and employed can never agree: the consequence is a new servant each week. The last comer had the look and air of one not easily crushed by circumstances. In the course of a few days, the neighbors were attracted to their doors by the loud voice of the would-be slaveholders. Out in the yard stood the mistress and her woman. The former had struck the latter. I am no [pugilist](#), but, as I looked at the black woman's fiery eye, her quivering form, and heard her dare her [assailant](#) to strike again, I was proud of her metal. In a short time the husband of the white woman made his appearance, and was about to deal a second blow, when she drew back telling him that she was no man's slave; that she was as free as he, and would take the law upon his wife for striking her. He [blustered](#), but there he stood deprived of his old power to kill her if it had so pleased him. He ordered her to leave his premises immediately, telling her he should not pay her a cent for the time she had been with them.

She quietly replied that she would see about that. She went to the Bureau, and very soon had things made right.

In this beautiful Forest City,—for it is beautiful notwithstanding the curse that so long hung over it,—there is a street where colored people were allowed to walk only on one side. Not long since an acquaintance of mine, while walking on what had been the forbidden side, was rudely pushed off by a white man, and told that she had no right there. She gave him to understand that Sherman's march had made Bull Street as much hers as his. Veils were not allowed to be worn by colored women. After the army came in, they went out with two on,—one over the face, the other on the back of the bonnet. Many of the planters have returned to their homes. Some wish to make contracts with their former slaves; but the majority are so unfair in their [propositions](#), that the people mistrust them.

Here is but one instance. A Mr. H—— has brought with him his old overseer. The master was noted for cruelty. For the slightest offence, he would cause his slaves to be stripped and whipped, while he would walk up and down, indulging in [coarse](#) jokes. After a hundred lashes had been given, he would say to the foreman, "Look out, there! you are not doing your duty." On which the man would take off his jacket, and say to the poor victim, "De Lord hab mercy on you now. I'se 'blige to do it."

This man proposes to make contracts on these conditions: a boat, a mule, pigs and chickens, are prohibited; produce of any kind not allowed to be raised; permission must be asked to go off of the place; a visit from a friend punished with a fine of \$1.00, and the second offence breaks the contract. Is this freedom, or encouragement to labor? Those who have had a taste of freedom will not make contracts with such men. Are they to be blamed, and held up as [vagrants](#) too lazy to earn a living?

Others will not hire men who are unwilling to have their wives work in the rice swamps. There is no limit to the injustice daily practised on these people. There were some here, this week, who never knew they were free, until New-Year's Day, 1866. They had been carried into the interior of South Carolina. Now they are brought and driven back into the State: [out of one Egypt into another](#). They are looking for "de freedom," they say. God grant they may find it! Mother, in her visits to the [plantations](#), has found extreme [destitution](#). We were told to-day, by Mr. Simms, the freedmen's faithful friend

and adviser, [that the owners of two of the plantations under his charge have returned, and the people are about to be sent off.](#)

There are eight freedmen's schools here; the largest has three hundred scholars. The teachers of the two largest schools are colored; most of them natives of this place. These schools have been partially supported by the colored people, and will hereafter be entirely so.

Credits

Louisa Jacobs, in *The Freedmen's Record*, March 1866, pp. 55–56.

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