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Harper's Weekly, December 26, 1863, page 818 (Editorial)

Now that the policy of the Government is maturely settled, it is clear that one of the chief questions of the immediate future will be the care of the freedmen. In ordinary times, when emancipation is enforced by law, as in the case of the British colonies, and especially in Jamaica, the rage and pride of the planters prevent a fair trial of the experiment. They refuse to treat honorably as paid laborers those whom they have been used to drive as cattle, and the inevitable consequence is that the great plantations fall into ruin, and the laborers take to the bush. Nothing is surer than that if the planters of Jamaica had been as equal to the new condition introduced by emancipation as the slaves were, the prosperity of the island would never have been disturbed.

The condition of our emancipated slaves is such as to require the most faithful and intelligent care. The operation of the act is to attract them to our lines. They come in groups of utterly destitute men, women, and children. The most unfortunate of human beings, they yet do not find corresponding sympathy. Even the Government which has freed them, and which invites them to enlist as soldiers, does not treat them honorably, and pays them not the wages of the white soldiers, with whom they bravely fight and nobly fall, but only the ten dollars a month allowed by the law for the general employment of contrabands. Homeless, almost houseless, utterly destitute and dependent, this rapidly-increasing class of our population demand a peculiar care. It is idle to say that no particular class of persons can be provided for, but they must all take their chance, because we recognize that common-sense is the basis of statesmanship when we establish a Bureau of Indian Affairs and a Department of Agriculture. Indians and farmers are the two classes directly interested; but does any body quarrel with the bureaus for that reason?

The sagacity of the President will undoubtedly lead him to make some proposition to Congress for the establishment of a Freedman's Bureau, charged with the care of this exceptional class. Davis says in his Message, with a sly leer at Europe, "By the Northern man, on whose deep-rooted prejudices no kindly restraining influence is exercised, they [the negroes] are treated with aversion and neglect." But the reluctance to touch the subject, the stupid prejudice against the word Abolitionism, the dull slang about "one idea," must give way to plain practical common-sense, or the country will be dishonored.

Harper's Weekly, December 2, 1863, page 818 (Editorial)

Note:

In February 1862 George William Curtis wrote Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase suggesting the creation of a federal agency to assist the former slaves crossing into Union territory. The March 1, 1862, issue of *Harper's Weekly* carried Curtis's endorsement of the same idea in his "Lounger" column. He placed such importance on the issue that he addresses it here in the first issue in which he assumed responsibility for writing the *Harper's Weekly* editorials. Curtis and his father-in-law, Francis Shaw, president of the philanthropic Freedmen's Relief Association, helped Senator Charles Sumner draft the Freedmen's Bill to establish the Freedmen's Bureau. It passed Congress in 1865.

Harper's Weekly, July 25, 1868, page 467 (Editorial)

The Freedmen's Bureau has always been an object of Democratic hatred; but no institution was ever more imperatively necessary, and none has been more useful. Naturally a party which was steadily hostile to the abolition of slavery loudly clamored for the abolition of any system of defense for the emancipated class. But there is no doubt whatever that the war of races which that party has prophesied and encouraged, and which it would gladly have seen begun in the hope of the extermination of a race guilty of a colored skin, has been prevented by no means so powerful as that of the Freedmen's Bureau.

The war left the late slaves free among a population that had always despised them as a servile race, and that now hated them as men who had loved and trusted the Government. The freedmen had the habit of dependence which a severe system of slavery develops. They had no resource, no hope whatever, but their labor, in a region where all the land belonged to the employers, and all the employers were their enemies. The circumstances of their emancipation were a constant exasperation to the late master class that waited only for the moment to reduce them again to some kind of peonage or to actual slavery. The laws in regard to the freedmen, that these masters passed with the support of the President, were infamous. They were spiteful and inhuman. Had there been no friendly and powerful hand ready to interfere, had the slaves freed by the war been left wholly, as the Democratic party and the President desired, to the tender mercies of their late masters, and had some bold leader appeared among them, as undoubtedly he would, they would not have submitted without a desperate struggle to the doom intended for them.

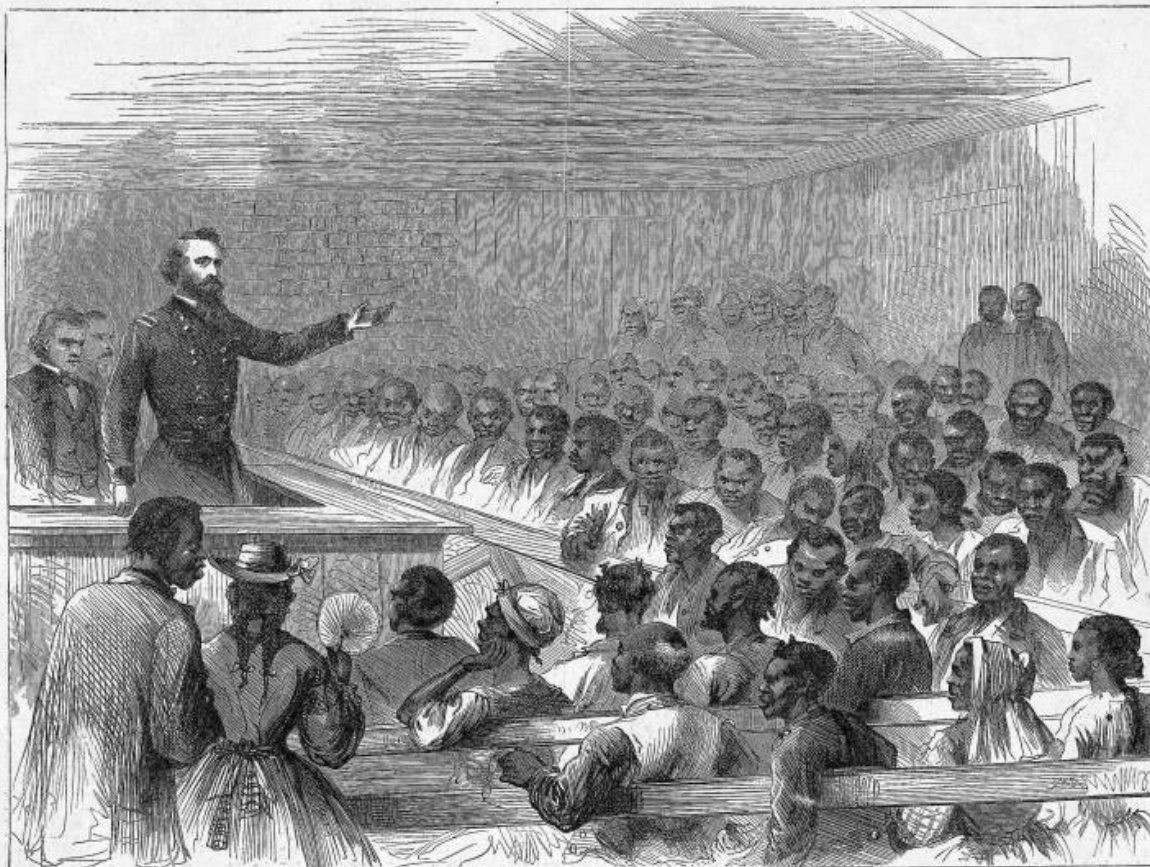
The Freedmen's Bureau was the conscience and common-sense of the country stepping between the hostile parties and saying to them, with irresistible authority, "Peace!" The country had made the slaves free. It recognized them as men. It had seen their unswerving and heroic fidelity to the cause of the Union, knowing it to be that of their recovered liberty. It resolved that the only way to develop manhood is to treat men as men. It therefore stood between the freedmen and starvation and cruel laws, meanwhile giving them arms and schools and civil and political equality, that they might start fair in the common race. Through the quiet force of the Bureau the hostile class at the South has felt the perpetual presence of the will and power of the American people. The Bureau charities of direct relief of food have been shared by all the destitute of every color, and meanwhile its organizing hand has helped to arrange labor upon the new basis, to compose disputes, to accustom the whole population to the new order. Its service in this respect has been incalculable.

It must be remembered that the danger of a bloody disturbance of the settlement of the war in regard to the freedmen has never been upon the side of the late slaves, but of their masters. Despised and outraged as they have been, the anarchical element was not the race that was said to be imbruted and degraded by slavery; it was that which claimed to be the superior and master race. The crimes of the freedmen have been under the circumstances so few as scarcely to be noted. Their industry in labor and their devotion to education have been so striking as to gain perpetual honor. While the late rebels at the South were passing their black-codes intended to restore as much of slavery as possible, and the Copperheads at the North were declaiming about the

barbarization and Africanization of the Southern States -- as if liberty were more barbarizing than slavery -- the freedmen were filling nearly four thousand schools, and themselves supporting more than a thousand of them. Old and young were busily studying; the increase of general intelligence among them has been remarkable; and as General Howard says -- who, as Chief of the Bureau, and a most sagacious friend of the freedmen, and untiring worker for them, has the best opportunity of knowing -- "the hopes of the warmest friends of the freedmen have been more than fulfilled. The future is full of promise for the entire race redeemed from bondage and ignorance."

Except for the Freedmen's Bureau, keeping the peace with intelligence and authority, organizing labor, establishing schools, saving the white population from the consequences of their own ferocity, it is easy to imagine how fearful would have been the condition of the Southern States during the period between the end of the war and the establishment of loyal governments. And now that those States are resuming their old relations in the Union, and for the first time with truly Republican governments, Congress is providing that the Bureau, which was in its nature temporary, shall cease its work. It has taught the freedmen that they are citizens of a government which recognizes their equal manhood. It has taught the late master class that all men have rights which must be respected. Clad in the armed authority of the United States, it has been a true minister of peace and as the occasion for its service disappears, the Freedmen's Bureau passes into history with that highest crown of praise, the pious gratitude of the poor and unfortunate.

Harper's Weekly, July 25, 1868, page 467 (Editorial)



GENERALS STERDMAN AND FULLERTON CONFERRING WITH THE FREEDMEN IN THEIR CHURCH AT TRENT RIVER SETTLEMENT.—Sketched by T. R. DAVIS.—[SEE PAGE 266.]