

THE FREEDMEN'S BUREAU.

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THE FREEDMEN'S BUREAU.

ONE by one, all traces of the late war are passing away. Our army officers have been dismissed by hundreds, and the unused vessels of the navy have been sold. The national debt is diminishing, and taxes are slowly growing beautifully less. But perhaps nothing so distinctly marks our return to a normal state of peace and quiet as the cessation of the Freedmen's Bureau. The nation no longer thinks it necessary to teach the black idea how to shoot, nor does it any longer throw around the colored man the protecting ægis of the military arm of the govern-

ment. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments have placed all manhood upon a plane of civil equality, and henceforth position is to be determined by individual effort.

Before our remembrance of the Bureau fades away into the dim past, we desire to chronicle some of the facts that have made its history so large a part of our national record for the last decade. The emancipation of the negro and his subsequent education have given this nation more credit abroad than any single fact of our preceding history. In his most eloquent Spanish, Señor

Castellar points to the work of the Freedmen's Bureau as the triumphant refutation of those who would assert the superiority of a monarchy to a republic; and in his official report to the authorities of France on public education in America, M. Hoppin says that nothing reflects more honor on the United States than the zeal which the government and private associations displayed during the most terrible periods of the great war of secession to assure to the negroes of the South the means of existence and education.

It was hard work to create this Bureau: Congress and the country were slow to recognize the necessities of the situation. The Proclamation of Emancipation was followed by two years of noisy and angry political discussion before the bill establishing the Bureau received the presidential signature. First it was christened the Bureau of Emancipation: then the House put it in the charge of the War Department, while the Senate located it in the Treasury. In a decidedly Republican House it was twice passed by a majority of only two. In vain were committees of conference appointed till the last day but one of the session, and then such a committee reported "An Act to establish a Bureau for the Relief of Freedmen and Refugees." This passed both Houses March 3, 1865, and received President Lincoln's signature on the same day.

The Act thus passed made no mention of that education which afterward became the chief work of the Bureau, nor did it contemplate a long work: it merely established the Bureau "during the present war of the rebellion, and for one year thereafter," for the supervision and management of lands abandoned by their rebel owners, and for the control of all subjects relating to refugees and freedmen. It was made a branch of the War Department; and it is one of the most singular circumstances connected with this abnormal work that the education of the children and the protection of the parents—both of them matters appertaining to the civil service of the nation—were thus

placed under the charge of the military authorities. In a time of great moral and political disturbance, when strained to its utmost to meet the demands and expenses of intestine war, the nation used the same arm which it was employing in the necessary work of death and destruction to protect the weak and educate the ignorant, at an expense of over fifteen millions of dollars.

When the Bureau was organized the condition of the colored people was indeed deplorable. Freedom had given them leave to travel, but had provided them with no homes. Their old masters refused to sell them homesteads or to allow them to remain in their former shanties. Vainly imagining that cities would afford them employment, they had huddled in large numbers around centres of population. Twenty thousand of them had swarmed at Washington, one hundred thousand were scattered about in Virginia, fifty thousand in North Carolina, and untold numbers in other parts of the South—all far away from their old homes. At the same time labor was in demand on the plantations, at rates low, to be sure, but yet sufficient for support. One of the first problems, therefore, brought before General Howard was to bring the idle laborers of the city into proximity to the labor-demand of the country. This was done by issuing orders of transportation at government expense for conveying refugees and freedmen from crowded cities to those places where labor was in demand. In 1866, 387 refugees and 6352 freedmen were thus transported; but for economy's sake, and that negroes might not look for a ride when they were able to walk, an order was issued, April 10, 1866, that transportation should not be given to able-bodied men and women except in extreme cases and to prevent actual suffering. In 1867 transportation was afforded to 720 refugees and 15,994 freedmen. The next year the great volume of population had become stationary, and the migratory movement was less visible: only 541 refugees and 3962 freedmen were transported. Looking back over

the whole history of the Bureau, we find that 3892 refugees and 29,460 freedmen were moved from one point to another. And in addition to this, 3677 teachers were carried free to open or close schools, while 18,852 packages of provisions were sent where there was lack of food. The benefit of this migratory movement to the labor of the country was very great, but its chief value was the employment it gave to the idle and unoccupied: it averted an untold amount of suffering and misery among the very poorest classes of the community.

The refugees, and the abandoned lands which were appropriated to them, as they are first named in the bill, claim our early attention. The bill was passed in March, 1865, and in June, President Johnson directed officers of the Treasury Department, military officers and others in the service of the United States, to turn over to the Bureau all abandoned lands and all funds collected by tax or otherwise for the benefit of refugees or freedmen, or acquired from abandoned lands. But the policy of Mr. Johnson soon began to change. The late Confederates received wholesale pardons, and orders were given that their plantations and other lands should be restored to them as fast as they were pardoned. The expected continuance of this policy made it unadvisable to locate refugees or freedmen on this kind of property: no guarantee of possession for even a limited period could be given to the temporary occupant. Where colonies of destitute freedmen had been planted on such lands, the Bureau retained control of them until the occupants could be removed without suffering or until the crops were gathered or paid for. The year 1865 saw 768,590 acres of abandoned lands in the possession of the Bureau: the next year saw but 272,231 acres in its possession, half a million of acres having been given back to the late owners within twelve months. The next year witnessed the return of fifty thousand more acres to the original proprietors. And as the amount re-

maining was too small to be of any use, an order was issued in 1868 directing the restoration to the former owners of all lands then in possession of the Bureau, or that these lands should be dropped from the returns except in cases where the government had already acquired a perfect title.

In addition to the transportation of laborers to scenes of labor and the care of abandoned lands, the Bureau has done an excellent work in collecting the claims of colored soldiers and sailors and their families for pay and bounty. At the organization of the Bureau it was found that the ignorance of the colored soldier exposed him to constant fraud. Large fees were charged, but too often no bounties were recovered. In March, 1867, Congress passed a law that all checks and Treasury certificates due to colored soldiers and sailors should be made payable to the Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, who was expected to see that the moneys were paid over to the right party. Up to October, 1870, the Bureau had filed in the various Departments 9622 claims, and had received from that of the Treasury, for the payment of those claims, \$7,683,618.61. The amount of fraud prevented in the payment of this large sum in small amounts and to ignorant claimants is incalculable. Colored pensioners have also, as far as practicable, been paid through the agency of the Bureau, thus ensuring their receipt of the whole sum due.

The charitable work of the Bureau next demands our attention—the provision it made for the starving and suffering; and here there was no distinction of color or sex. Wherever there was deficiency of food the Bureau used all its legal powers to supply the want. The issue of rations commenced in June, 1865, or nearly as soon as the Bureau itself; and in September of that year a million and a half of rations were issued to refugees and freedmen for that month alone—over three hundred and seventy thousand, be it observed, to the white race, or about twelve thousand rations a day. The full cost of one of these

days' rations was fifteen cents when meat was used, twelve cents when herrings were substituted. Not a large outlay for the support of a full-grown man, nor were the materials of the most valuable kind, yet the amount of suffering thus relieved and of misery prevented was incalculable.

In August, 1866, a circular was issued discontinuing rations, except to the sick in hospitals and in orphan asylums. But in 1867 the general failure of the Southern crops caused apprehensions of great want and suffering. General Howard was directed by the Senate to furnish an estimate of the number that would be in need of aid, and the cost of supplying them with food. He replied that 32,662 whites and 24,238 blacks would be in suffering circumstances before the harvest of another crop; and he estimated that eight and a half millions of rations would be required for their assistance. Whereupon Congress empowered the Department of War to issue supplies of food sufficient to prevent starvation and extreme want, and, with great economy, further voted that the rations should be issued through the Freedmen's Bureau and out of the sums already appropriated to it. Thereupon General Howard applied \$500,000 to the purchase of food for the Southern poor. By this provision 91,902 whites, 86,257 blacks and 55,213 others, "color not given"—in all 233,372 persons—were supplied with 6,869,296 pounds of corn and 850,388 pounds of pork. As these returns were made monthly for all the spring and summer months, the same persons are often included in the different months. Each adult received a bushel of corn and eight pounds of meat per month—children under fourteen, half that amount. The number of recipients greatly varied in each month, as well as in each State. In April, Georgia had 579 whites and 225 blacks fed at the nation's expense; in July, she had 21,771 whites and 18,584 blacks. Everywhere aid was granted not to color, but to humanity.

That the tendency of the Bureau has

not been to encourage idleness or pauperism is clearly evident from the fact that among a race of four millions of people, accustomed from infancy to the supporting and controlling hand of the master, but one in two hundred ever became an object of charity, and nearly all these were persons who by reason of age, infirmity or disease would have been objects of charity in any State and at any time. When the war had deranged the natural courses of industry, when drought or failure of the crops had induced famine among the poorer class of both colors, when sudden freedom had deprived the late slave of his accustomed reliance on his master's support, then the Bureau stepped in with kindly offices of Christian charity. It is no wonder that so many rations were issued: it is a greater wonder that more were not called for.

Freedom, following in the wake of our armies, released the slave from work: it also performed the corresponding office of releasing the master from the duty of supporting him. The sick, the poor, the aged blacks were thus left without resources or help. Even before the creation of the Bureau, wherever our army went, hospitals followed; and when the Bureau was organized, all medical charity was put under its supervision. The death-rate among the blacks, crowded in filthy shanties, living at just above the starvation-point, and destitute of medicines, was fearful. The first year of the Bureau's care reduced the death-rate in some localities from thirty per cent. to four and six-tenths. During that year alone 166,521 persons received medical treatment. Fifty-six hospitals were established, and five orphan asylums. During the four years of the Bureau's existence it had under its medical charge no less than 584,178 persons—sick, insane, idiotic, extremely aged—for whom no provision had been made by local authority, and who had no means of their own for procuring the attendance and necessaries due to their enfeebled condition; and it is estimated that there were as many more who received advice, but whose

cases were not recorded on the books of the Bureau; so that one million of the poor and the sick received medical aid and assistance. This was charity in its highest sense; and it is astonishing to note at how small a pecuniary cost this relief was afforded. The average expense for medicines, hospital stores and bedding furnished to each patient under treatment for the year ending June 30, 1866, was only a dollar and a quarter, and for the next year only eighty-five cents. Of all the work of the Bureau, none appears to have done so much good at so small an expense as the medical division.

There was one work done by the Bureau officers not recognized in the law that appointed them, and of too delicate a nature to be reckoned up in statistics; and yet it was of the happiest influence upon the well-being of both blacks and whites. Under slavery the black man had no use for intelligence. He made no contract: receiving his pound of pork, his peck of corn, he did the work assigned him, a mere brute of the higher animal order. With the advent of freedom came an unaccustomed right of choice. The laborer now had contracts to make and money to receive, yet he knew not how much to charge for his services, nor how to collect the sum when due. And there was a very suspicious doubt about the willingness of his late master to pay him. It was a very difficult task to instill into the Southern mind the idea that the labor of the black man was his own property, to be disposed of on his own terms. Too often the master tried to defraud his late slave, and the Bureau officer ordered him to pay the promised wage. On the other hand, the workman would sometimes propose to leave before the expiration of his contract; and here the Bureau told him of the sacred nature of his contract, and led him to work out his agreement. Both sides were taught to make fair contracts and to adhere to them. In one State and in a single year not less than fifty thousand contracts, executed in duplicate, were drawn up between the two parties.

The black man was thus educated to labor for pay, the white man led to give him the stipulated wage, and the bitterness and suspicion between the ex-master and his ex-slave were gradually smoothed away.

The negro had never been permitted to testify in courts of justice: the Bureau put him on the witness-stand, and accustomed the Caucasian to his presence there. Led by a supporting hand, the black man, so newly introduced to the life of freedom, was now taught the practical lesson of self-support and self-assertion. But it was by a rough and stony path that he entered upon his life of free labor. The first year after the war the small cruelties, the minor oppressions, were innumerable. One commissioner alone reported three thousand four hundred and five such cases adjudicated in a single quarter in his district. The chairman of the Committee on Freedmen's Affairs declared that more than one hundred thousand such complaints must have been heard and decided by Bureau officers in a single year. These complaints have not entirely ceased, but that they have dwindled to a minimum is mainly due to the judicious interference of the officers of the Freedmen's Bureau.

But the great work of the Bureau, though not originally so intended, has been educational. In its commencement it had to do with a terribly ignorant race—not only to grapple with the ignorance of childhood, but the far worse ignorance born of slavery. The minds of the black race had been torpid during two centuries of serfdom. The religion that should have elevated them consisted almost entirely of the duty of obedience, or partook of the animal nature of the believers. The marriage-tie was a movable yoke, imposed and taken away at the master's pleasure. The whole tendency of slavery had been to obliterate mind and conscience. And it was to four millions of such a people as this that Freedom now presented herself, offering the Bible and the spelling-book in the present, the ballot in the future. To quicken their

dormant minds became the work of the Freedmen's Bureau. In every large town, in most considerable villages, it at once hired school-houses and provided teachers. There is an intense hungering and thirsting after education amongst the colored people. War itself was made to educate them. The army carried its instructors with it. Officers' servants learned their letters at bivouac-fires. Chaplains of colored troops became instructors. The Christian Commission had a corps of fifty teachers in camp. So that at the end of the war it was estimated that twenty thousand colored soldiers could read intelligently, and a much larger number had laid the alphabetical foundations of knowledge. Wherever our armies led, schools followed. At Hampton, Beaufort, Roanoke Island and New Orleans—wherever there was a stationary corps of colored soldiers—schools were immediately put in operation. Major-General Banks inaugurated a school-system for Louisiana, and supported it by a military tax. On the entrance of General Sherman into Savannah schools were immediately opened, and ten intelligent colored men selected as teachers. Two of the largest of these schools were kept in Bryan's slave-mart, where the human auction-block became the teacher's throne of power. An army surgeon of the colored troops at Fort Livingston offered to teach a few soldiers of his regiment, if these in turn would teach others. The offer was gratefully accepted, and, selecting a class of the ten brightest and smartest scholars in the fort, he taught them two hours each day, on condition that each one of the ten should take a class, and thus communicate his knowledge to others. A year later the commanding officer of the fort reported that the men had made such progress that, besides other papers, they had subscribed for forty copies of Harper's and Leslie's weeklies.

One of the most remarkable instances of the determination of our black allies to acquire the rudiments of an education is found in the continuation of schools during the vacations, and often

in the absence of the teachers. It was always expected among them that the older scholars should carefully lead the younger up the first steps of the hill of science. It hardly seems juvenile nature, however, for boys and girls to give up their play for the sake of learning, but they did it, and paid their teachers for doing it too. In 1868, 178 schools continued open through all the heats of a Louisianian summer—in Mississippi, 75 schools, with an attendance of 3500 scholars, kept through the summer. Over six hundred schools were taught through that summer vacation. In 1869, one thousand two hundred schools were carried on through the vacation months, 309 of them in Alabama alone. Science may proudly point to the devotion of her older followers, but it may be doubted if the humbler annals of education can point to any such instance as this—a whole race of children foregoing their play and their pocket-money, and sacrificing not the luxuries, but the comforts, and in some cases the necessities, of life, that they might acquire that learning which they prized so highly.

Dr. Vogell, Superintendent of Education in North Carolina, meeting one of the old residents of his district, asked her, "Well, auntie, what are you doing?" "Please God, massa, trying to l'arn." "Who hears your lessons?" "Oh, I goes to de night-school ebery week." "Where are the children?" "Gone to school. They l'arn a heap, and when we gets round de fire at night, dey gets small bundles light-wood and t'rows on, and dey reads to me out of deir books: dey reads the Bible to me, too, and how good it makes me feel to hear de blessed book!" "But you want the children to aid you to get provisions?" "Dat's very true, massa, but dere is better bread than comes out of de arth. No, honey, can't stop de chillun: dey mus' l'arn. Dese old hands can work for de folks a little longer. I gets a little meal and bacon for my work two or t'ree times a week—we don't have much else—but I tells you, massa, we can't feel hungry when we reads: dat's better than vittals, massa."

It was impossible to be in the colored regiments, or to be associated with any of the institutions for their education since the war, and not notice the elevating influence of knowledge. One of the chaplains of our dark regiments had a body-servant named John Green. One morning John entered the tent to kindle the fire. His task was soon done, the chaplain still slumbering, as John supposed. And now the man began to study the lesson set him the night before: "Thou God seest me." He began to spell the first word: T-h-o-u. "John Green," he said to himself, "what is that? what did master say that was?" Looking and hesitating a while, he at last uttered, "Thou. John Green, you have it." Thus he spelled and pronounced through the sentence, stumbling considerably at the two-syllabled word, "seest," but finally deciphering the whole and reading it. Then, stretching himself up to his full height, he exclaimed, "John Green, you have it. You can read. JOHN GREEN, YOU ARE A MAN!"

Mr. Sydney Andrews notes the old washerwoman hard at work in the open air, her arms in the wash-tub, but her eyes fastened on the spelling-book before her, carefully tied back to the fence, so that she could at the same time pick out her *A B C*'s and her dirty clothes. General R. K. Scott reports finding a native African at Charleston, South Carolina, a thoroughly educated man and a distinguished linguist, conversing fluently in ten languages, and equally conversant with the Greek Testament and the Koran. And yet this scholar was only a field-hand, and earning common wages, which he eked out by teaching an evening-school.

An old woman in Louisiana was seen at school one day holding her Testament upside-down. When the amused observer asked her if she could read, the aged scholar replied, "No, chile, but it's a blessed t'ing to hold it."

When the war ended, private benevolence and the Freedmen's Bureau began, *pari passu*, to broadcast the seeds of education over the South, but they

were unable to keep pace with the popular demand. The negro esteemed knowledge as synonymous with power: he knew that his great lack was culture, and he eagerly girded himself for the educational contest. The benevolent societies of the North sent teachers by hundreds, the American Missionary Association alone having at one time six hundred teachers in the field. The friends of the colored race in England gave half a million of dollars for education. The Bureau raised numerous school-houses, and threw around them the protecting ægis of the national government. Wherever thirty scholars were collected private associations provided the teacher and the Bureau paid the rent. But their efforts were insufficient for the wants of the race. Scattered over wide plantations, away from the great thoroughfares of travel, surrounded by a superior race, they yet succeeded in gaining very extensively the rudiments of knowledge. Perhaps not less than one million of scholars have received some smattering of knowledge during the last six years. Some have obtained a good common-school education, while a few have entered on the study of the classics. One of the graduates at Harvard in the class of 1870 was a colored youth. But what sacrifices they have made to win this education! In 1866 ten thousand negroes petitioned General Canby that an additional tax might be laid on themselves for colored schools, though they were already taxed for white schools. The Superintendent of Education for Virginia reported that many of the pupils at Louisa Court-house walked from five to eight miles to school. At Gordonsville two girls walked nine miles every morning and evening to attend school, and this they did steadily for two years. Two colored men in North Carolina walked one hundred and forty miles to ask for the establishment of a school in their neighborhood and to get some newspapers.

Such educational progress as the blacks have made has been won by hard fighting. The prejudices of the

South furnished innumerable obstacles. In the years that immediately followed the war the teacher of the colored school was socially ostracised from all white companionship. School-houses were burnt down, and the occasional murder of a teacher testified to the popular antipathy to such an employment. As a general rule, the teachers had to board with the parents of their scholars: no white tavern or boarding-house would receive them. But this state of things is slowly dying away. The employer is beginning to recognize the fact that skilled labor is superior to brute force. The black school-house is an existing fact, to which the Southern mind has gradually become accustomed.

The instruction the blacks have received during these last six years has often been exceedingly fragmentary, almost always rudimentary, yet they have steadily improved under it. Each year has witnessed more and higher schools and seminaries; and there are to-day eleven colleges and universities, seventy-four high and sixty-one normal schools, with some twelve thousand pupils in them, especially intended for colored youth. To be sure, the majority of students at these *soi-disant* universities pursue only the studies followed at our best Northern academies and normal schools, but black teachers in large and larger numbers are being sent out each year, and the whole race is steadily uplifting itself by the power of education and civilization. "We are rising, massa," one of the little scholars at Atlanta said to General Howard. The social position of the blacks and the callings they follow are improving every day. About three millions of dollars are now laid up in the Freedmen's Savings Bank, and this amount is increasing at the rate of a hundred thousand dollars a month. Of the thirty branches of the Freedmen's Bank, one-half have colored cashiers. At the close of the war three-fifths of the teachers of the colored schools were whites, two-fifths blacks, and these but poorly fitted for their work. Now more than three-fifths

of these teachers are blacks; and a few years hence our dark-hued citizens will be able to obtain their legal, medical and spiritual advice from well-educated persons of their own color.

It is interesting to note at how small an expenditure the work of the Bureau has been accomplished. The total expense in money has been \$13,028,304.27—in goods, \$2,330,778. These goods were unused army stores left on hand at the close of the war, and would hardly have realized half their cost at public sale. The collection of bounties has cost \$279,655; transportation, \$239,902.83; schools, \$3,572,365.94; while the whole amount expended in charitable purposes, including the old army stores at full cost, has been \$7,677,590.96. Of these fifteen millions of dollars, government has contributed but eleven millions, the remainder being taken from the Refugees' Fund—that is, from rent of lands and buildings taken from the Confederates, from payments made by the freedmen themselves, and from army stores. It may be fairly asked whether any great national work that accomplished as much has ever cost so little.

Speaking of Italian bondage in the Middle Ages, Lord Lytton says: "He who first arouses in the bondman the sense and soul of freedom comes as near as is permitted to man—nearer than the philosopher, nearer even than the poet—to the great creative attribute of God." This attribute has been the special office of the Freedmen's Bureau. It has created a soul beneath the dead ribs of the black race of America. It has taken a dull, degraded, imbruted people, and given protection to the parents, education to their children. If these four millions of blacks and their more numerous descendants are ever to be a component part of the people of the United States, educated, republicanized, Christianized, it will be mainly due, in the providence of God, to Abraham Lincoln, who proclaimed their emancipation, and to the Freedmen's Bureau, that educated them.

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