The Education of Freedmen, part 1

Harriet Beecher Stowe

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IV. THE EDUCATION OF FREEDMEN.

THE short period of fourteen years that has elapsed since the late war has been witness of a more wonderful moral and political revolution in these United States than has ever been recorded in history before.

Between four and five million human beings, who had hitherto been deprived of every right of human nature, have been suddenly precipitated into freedom and invested with the rights of republican citizens.

There have been instances before of the sudden emancipations of oppressed masses, but their results have been so fearful as to fill thoughtful minds with a just terror. The French Revolution with its sansculottism, its untold horrors, ended perforce in a despotism, and it was not without cause that an English thinker treated of our emancipation act as "Shooting Niagara." We have shot Niagara, and are alive and well. Our ship of state has been through those mighty rapids and plunged down that awful gulf, while nations held their breath, expecting to see her go to pieces. But lo! she has emerged, stanch and steady, and is now sailing on.

That the passengers have been somewhat tumbled about and shaken, that here and there a timber has cracked or a joint started, that there have been whirlpools and eddies, and uncomfortable sailing, we all know. But the miracle of our day is that the ship is sailing on, in better order than ever before in better order, for that unwieldy stowage of oppression which she was obliged to carry has been thrown overboard, and she sails free!

In order justly to estimate the present state of education and progress among the freedmen of the United States, we must glance back to the condition in which they were under slavery. A slave could hold no property, had no rights, could not testify either in a court of justice or a Christian church, could not contract a legal marriage, had no legal rights over his children in short, was a human being carefully, legally, and systematically despoiled of every right of humanity.

To teach a slave to read and write was forbidden, under heavy penalties. In some States the penalty for teaching him to read was far heavier than for maiming him or putting out his eyes. As the soil in certain States became exhausted, breeding slaves for a more southern market became a systematic process, and was reported upon in agricultural papers and meetings in much the same terms that might apply to the breeding of horses and mules.

In the Northern States, the colored people were generally disfranchised, and, if not forbidden education by law, were repelled from the schools by prejudice, and prejudices apparently far more bitter at the North than at the South.

In 1832 Miss Prudence Crandall undertook to open a private boarding−school for young colored girls, in Canterbury, Connecticut. The enterprise was denounced in advance, by the people of this place, in a public meeting. When the term opened, with fifteen or twenty young girls from Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and Providence, storekeepers, butchers, milkmen, and farmers, with one consent, refused to sell provisions to the school, and supplies had to be brought from expensive distances. The scholars were insulted in the streets; the

door−steps and doors were besmeared with filth, and the well filled with the same; the village doctor refused to visit the sick pupils; and the trustees of the church forbade them to set foot in their building. The house was assaulted by a mob with clubs and iron bars; they broke the glass of the windows and terrified the inmates. Finally, the State Legislature passed an act making this school an illegal enterprise, and under this act Miss Crandall was imprisoned in the county jail.

This apparently unaccountable sensitiveness of the Northern mind becomes intelligible when we consider that there were as really slaveholders in the Northern as the Southern States. Negro slaves were the assets of every Southern estate, plantation, and firm; they were offered as security for debt, and the large commercial business of the North with the South was carried on upon this basis. There were abundance of rich slaveholders in Northern churches, who felt with the keen instinct of self−interest anything which interfered with their gains, and who did not wish to have trouble of conscience, and they hated the negro because he aroused this uncomfortable faculty. The Northern abolitionist proclaimed that to buy, hold or sell a human being for gains was a sin against God, and, like all other sins, to be immediately repented of and forsaken. Now, when a New York merchant got a letter from his lawyer, apprising him that he had taken twenty thousand dollars' worth of negroes as security for his debt, and returned answer to sell and remit, it was but natural that he should hereafter be very excitable under such teachings, and denounce them as incendiary and fanatical. The bitterness of Southern slaveholders was tempered by many considerations of kindness for servants born in their houses, or upon their estates; but the Northern slaveholder traded in men and women whom he never saw, and of whose separations, tears, and miseries he determined never to hear.

The great consolatory doctrine that soothed the consciences both of Northern and Southern slaveholders was that the negro was unfit for any other condition than that of slavery; incapable of culture, education, and self−guidance, and therefore, both North and South, efforts to educate him aroused special opposition and resistance.

One of the leaders in this Canterbury affair expressed briefly the sense of the whole pro−slavery party North and South: "We are not merely opposed to that school. We mean that there shall never be such a school set up anywhere in our State. The colored people never can rise from a menial condition in this country; they ought not to be permitted to rise here. They are an inferior race of beings, and never can or ought to be recognized as the equals of the whites. Let the niggers be sent back to Africa, and there improve themselves as much as they may. The condition of the colored population of our country can never be essentially improved on this continent."

This was the vital point of the conflict, briefly stated. The abolitionists set themselves, therefore, to the education of the black race.

Oberlin College, founded in 1835, in Oberlin, Ohio, was the first permanent endowed institution avowedly opened to give impartial privileges of education without regard to color. In our national capital a brave, heroic woman, named Myrtella Miner, consecrated her life to founding a school for the young colored women of the District of Columbia, who had hitherto been left to ignorance and vice. Miss Miner wore out her strength and shortened her life in this cause, but the school she founded still exists, and is doing a good work in Washington. In memory of her heroism the ladies' hall in Howard University is called Miner Hall. Let her memory be blessed!

In 1855 John G. Fee, the son of a Kentucky slaveholder, founded in the little village of Berea, in Madison County, Kentucky, a school in which white and colored were to be admitted to equal privileges.

Young Fee renewed in his experience the virtues and the persecutions of the primitive Christians. For preaching the duty of emancipation and the sinfulness of slavery in his native State, he was disinherited by his father. His whole private patrimony he expended in redeeming a slave woman, whom his father had sold away from her husband into Southern bondage. The woman was a member of the same Christian church with himself. Her ransom left to Fee only a pittance for self−support, and he became a missionary under the care of the American

Missionary Society, a society formed on expressly antislavery principles. In his labors young Fee encountered the fury of mob−violence. Two or three times he was seized, his colored assistant brutally flogged before his eyes, and himself, with rope adjusted round his neck, threatened with hanging, unless he pledged himself to abandon his enterprise and leave the State. With Christian calmness he kneeled down, saying: "I can bear any suffering, but I will give no such pledges"; and to−day Berea College, with an endowment of between eighty and one hundred thousand dollars, is the monument of his perseverance.

Thus we have seen that until the time of the late war the condition of the African race in these States was, for the most part, a condition of hopeless bondage to ignorance. The efforts for their education were a few twinkling, scattered stars in a night of rayless darkness.

Here we must not omit to do justice to a large class of conscientious Christians among the Southern slaveholders, who felt deeply and oppressively their responsibility to their slaves, and labored sincerely to impart instruction to them within the limits allowed by law. Occasionally individuals were found who took upon themselves the responsibility of disregarding the penalties of law, and teaching their slaves to read and write; but, in the very nature of the case, such instances were exceptional. Yet undoubtedly the kindly relations engendered between servants and masters and mistresses, in these efforts to impart Christian instruction, were the reason why there was no painful uprising or insurrection attending the war. Christianity, however imperfectly apprehended, was a bond of peace between masters and servants.

At last came the war, and in the beginning of that conflict the best political friends of the African race, the antislavery President and Cabinet, and all concerned in the Government, took pains to affirm that emancipation was no part of the object or intention of that war.

But it soon became evident that the liberation of the slave was the object and intention of "Him that ruleth in the armies of heaven." The cause of the African was pleaded according to his fashion who hath said, "By fire and sword will the Lord plead with all flesh, and the slain of the Lord shall be many."

The time came when the nation was forced into emancipation as a war measure, and, having liberated the slave, she enrolled him in her armies. Having done this, the national honor became pledged to the protection of the race thus set free, and the right of suffrage and the provisions of the civil−rights bill followed as a necessary consequence.

For years patriots, statesmen, conscientious and Christian men, had toiled and agonized over the inscrutable problem, How could slavery be abolished without ruin to the country? Madison, Jefferson, Washington, all had their schemes all based on the idea that after emancipation it would be impossible for the whites and the blacks to live harmoniously together. Sudden emancipation was spoken of as something involving danger, bloodshed, and violence; and yet, as no one could propose a feasible system of preparation, the drift of the Southern mind had come to be toward indefinite perpetuation and extension.

Our emancipation was forced upon us it was sudden; it gave no time for preparation, and our national honor forced us to give, not only emancipation, but the rights and defenses of citizenship. This was the position in which the war left us. We had four million new United States citizens in our Union, without property, without education, with such morals as may be inferred from the legal status in which they had been kept; they were surrounded by their former white owners, every way embittered toward them, and in no wise disposed to smooth their path to liberty and competence.

That in such a sudden and astounding change there should have been struggle and conflict; that the reconstruction of former slave States, in such astonishingly new conditions of society, should have been with some difficulty, wrath, and opposition; that there should have been contentions, mistakes, mismanagements, and plenty of undesirable events to make sensation articles for the daily press, was to be expected.

But wherever upon God's earth was such an unheard−of revolution in the state of human society accomplished with so little that was to be deprecated?

For in this year, 1878, certain propositions of very great significance bear assertion, and can be maintained by ample proof:

1. The cotton crop raised by free labor is the largest by some millions that ever has been raised in the United States. That settles the question as to the free−labor system.

2. The legal status of the negro is universally conceded as a finality by the leading minds of the South.

3. The common−school system has been established throughout the Southern States, and recognized in theory by the wisest Southern men as to be applied impartially to whites and blacks.

4. All of the large religious denominations are conducting educational movements among the freedmen on a large scale. There are scattered through the Southern States, under the patronage of different denominations, thirty−nine chartered and endowed institutions for the higher education of colored people as teachers, ministers, physicians, farmers, and mechanics. Besides these, there are sixty−nine schools of a lower grade. It is calculated that in the last sixteen years twenty million dollars has been contributed and invested in the work of educating the freedmen.

5. Leading and influential men at the South are in many cases openly patrons of these educational efforts. Several of these institutions have been generously assisted by the States in which they are founded. The last reports of all these institutions represent them as in a successful and flourishing condition.

6. The colored race is advancing in material wealth and prosperity.

The bounds of an article are too limited for the abundance of proof that might be cited under these heads.

We shall do our best to select from this abundance, and in the first place we shall consider what is being done for the education of the colored race by the common−school system.

In 1867 Congress created a National Bureau of Education in Washington, to collect statistics upon education and diffuse such information as shall aid the citizens of the United States in the establishment and maintenance of efficient school systems.

The first report of the Commissioner, in 1870, contains this passage (p. 13):

The information contained in the accompanying papers, in regard to education in the States where emancipation has lately taken effect, contains features in marked distinction from those where freedom has been longer universal. It is gratifying that slavery exists nowhere any longer in the land, to close the door effectually against universal education. It is gratifying to observe the avidity with which those lately slaves have sought the primer and the means of higher instruction. It is gratifying to know that the large−hearted Peabody and many benevolent associations have done so much to facilitate and encourage education among all classes in the South. It is gratifying to reflect that the Government, through the Freedman's Bureau, has accomplished results so vast in this direction, being able to show that in July last, in day−and night−schools, regularly and irregularly reported, 149,581 pupils had been in attendance. It is gratifying to know that under the restoration policy of Congress the reorganized State governments have adopted Constitutions making obligatory the establishment and conduct of free public schools for all the children of school age, and that laws have been enacted and the work of education so generally commenced under them, organizing superintendence, employing teachers, and building schoolhouses, introducing here and there the germs of systems which have been tried elsewhere and proved most successful.

The report then goes on to mention each Southern State in detail, from which it appears that a movement for common schools had been set on foot in every one of the Southern States, but was meeting with active and powerful resistance. It was a new movement; the States were all poor, embarrassed by the results of the war, and little disposed to submit to any tax for that purpose, and, as usual, those were most opposed who most needed education. The report of 1871 shows the same conflict. It reports an earnest desire on the part of the colored people for education, and in many sections a blind prejudice against any efforts to give it to them. The work of building schoolhouses for the colored people and of supporting teachers was divided between the Freedman's Bureau and the various religious bodies whose missionaries were in the field.

Thus we see that the difficulty of securing common−school provision for the colored population was only part and parcel of the objection to the common−school system itself in the Southern States. The men who have gallantly fought that battle for the whites were the wisest, the most enlightened in their several States, and were fully sensible of the need of education for the colored race; but they had first to conquer the prejudices of an unenlightened community against any system of common−school instruction. In February, 1878, a Southern Educational Convention was held in Atlanta, Georgia, with a view to memorializing Congress for aid in popular education. Over a hundred delegates from the eight following States were present, viz., Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Missouri.

A noticeable paragraph in the memorial is the following:

Resolved, That as the educational laws of the several States represented by us make no discriminations in favor of or against the children of any class of citizens, and as those charged with the administration of these laws have endeavored, in the past, to have them carried into effect impartially, so do we pledge ourselves to use our influence to secure even−handed justice to all classes of citizens in the application of any educational funds provided by the national Government.

In another part of their memorial they say:

In the altered condition of society, brought about by the late war, every man is a voter; and the safety of republican institutions depends upon extending to the masses the benefits of education.

On the ground of the large addition of population to be taught in the persons of the freedmen, and of the losses by depreciation of property consequent on the war, they ask for a larger governmental aid than would be given to the settled Northern States.

What is to be noticed in this appeal is, that it fully assumes on the part of these States the duty of giving equal school privileges to all children of the State, without regard to color or condition. In short, in regard to this branch of the subject, our conviction, based on an examination of the yearly reports submitted to the National Bureau, is that, in the main, the leaders of State education at the South have been well disposed to the colored race; that in theory they regard them entitled to an equal share in State education, and have extended it to them in practice so far as the means have been in their power.

We come now to consider what has been done for the freedmen by the Christian Church in America.

Very early in the war it was decided to receive and protect fugitive slaves, and our armies became cities of refuge for them. "Their advance," says a writer, "was a signal for a rally of slaves from all the country round; they flocked in upon the line of march by bridle−paths and across fields old men on crutches, babies on their mothers' backs, women wearing cast−off blue jackets of Yankee cavalry−men, boys in abbreviated trousers of rebel gray sometimes lugging a bundle of household goods, sometimes riding an old mule borrowed from 'massa,' but oftener empty−handed, with nothing whatever to show for a lifetime of unrewarded toil. But they were free! And with what swinging of ragged hats, and tumult of rejoicing hearts, and fervent 'God bless you!'

they greeted their deliverers!" The year of jubilee, for which they had prayed and waited so many years, was come!

In time, four million of these bondmen were made free by the war power. The same writer from whom we have quoted thus sketches their condition: "They were homeless, penniless, ignorant, improvident; unprepared in every way for the dangers and duties of freedom. Self−reliance they never had had the opportunity to learn, and, suddenly left to shift for themselves, they were at the mercy of knaves ready to cheat them out of their honest earnings. They had been kept all their lives in a school of immorality, so that even church−membership was no evidence that one was not a thief, a liar, or a libertine."

Their former masters were so impoverished by their emancipation and other losses of the war that they had but little ability and were so exasperated that they had less disposition to help them.

But poor, ignorant, and simple as this emancipated mass were, they differed in one respect from the masses liberated by the French Revolution, and from all other suddenly liberated masses of which we have read in history. Their enthusiasm and impulse was not for plunder or for revenge, or for drink, or any form of animal indulgence, but for education. They rushed not to the grog−shop but to the schoolroom they cried for the spelling−book as for bread, and pleaded for teachers as a necessary of life. This enthusiasm to learn on the part of the liberated slaves was met by an equal enthusiasm to teach on the part of Northern Christians. Every religious denomination sent its teachers Unitarians and Orthodox were here of one heart and mind, and their teachers followed the course of the armies, and penetrated wherever they could find protection. Long before the war closed, there were teachers and schools in our camps and in all the region where our armies protected the settlements of fugitive slaves.

The nation took these people as her wards, and appointed a Freedman's Bureau to superintend their affairs to regulate their wages and work, and to provide for them schoolrooms, schools, and teachers.

We have before us, through the kindness of General Howard, a volume of the reports of this Bureau from January, 1866, to July 1, 1870.

The first report says: "The desire of the freedmen for knowledge has not been overstated. Their freedom has given a wonderful stimulus to all effort, indicating a vitality that augurs well for their future."

The report goes on to say that "all classes, even those advanced in life, are beginning the alphabet coming to evening and Sabbath schools, and may be seen along railroads, or off duty, as servants on steamboats, or in hotels, earnestly studying their spelling−books. Regiments of colored soldiers are all improving and learning and the officers deserve great respect for their efforts for the education of their men. The 128th U. S. Colored Troops, at Beaufort, were found gathered into school in a neat camp schoolhouse, erected by the regiment, and taught by regularly detailed teachers from the line officers the colonel commanding superintending the arrangements with deep interest." The report goes through each Southern State in detail, giving an account in each of the general educational revival. One passage is specially noticeable:

"Through the entire South efforts are being made by the colored people to 'educate themselves.' In the absence of teachers, they are determined to be self−taught, and everywhere some elementary book, or fragments of it, may be seen in the hands of negroes. They communicate to each other that which they learn, and with very little learning many take to teaching. Not only are individuals seen at study under the most untoward circumstances, but in many places I have found native schools, often rude and imperfect, but there they are, a group of all ages trying to learn. Some young man or woman, some old preacher, in cellar, shed, or corner of negro meeting−house, with spelling−book in hand, is their teacher. . . . Again," says the reporter, "I saw schools of higher order at Goldsboro, North Carolina; two young colored men, who but a little time before had begun to learn themselves, had gathered one hundred and fifty pupils, all quite orderly and hard at study." The report also speaks of schools taught by

colored men at Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans. One in the latter city, he says, would bear comparison with any Northern school; he says that in this school very creditable specimens of writing were shown, and all the older classes could recite or read fluently both in French and English. This was a free school wholly supported by colored people. He says that he gave special pains to ascertaining facts upon this subject, and reports that schools of this kind exist in all the large places, and were making their appearance through the entire Southern country. The Superintendent of Schools in South Carolina assured him that there was no place of any size where such a school was not attempted by the colored people. He remarks, in conclusion: "This is a wonderful state of things. We have just emerged from a terrific war peace is not yet declared, there is scarcely a beginning of reorganized society at the South yet here is a people long imbruted by slavery and the most despised of any on earth, whose chains are no sooner broken than they spring to their feet, an exceeding great army, clothing themselves with intelligence. What other people have shown such a passion for education?"

It must be borne in mind that this is a report in 1866 in the very incipiency of the enterprise. These semi−annual reports to the Freedman's Bureau contain a most wonderful and interesting history of their progress toward education and competence.

In the last report of the Freedman's Bureau, which closed in 1870, they speak of 247,000 children under systematic instruction, with 9,307 teachers and 4,239 schools. They also record in the Freedman's Savings Bank, the total deposits of freedmen, from 1866 to 1870, as $16,960,336.62.

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE.