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Author(s): Ira Berlin, Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, Jos. Dan'l Pope, Charles C. Soule, Edward M. Stoeber
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The Terrain of Freedom: The Struggle over the Meaning of Free Labor in the U.S. South

*by Ira Berlin, Steven Hahn, Steven F.
Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S.
Rowland*

Freedmen and Southern Society Project
History Department
University of Maryland

INTRODUCTION

During the 1860s, the tide of social and political revolution that had ebbed and flowed in continental Europe swept through the United States. Yet, in the worldwide struggles of which it was an integral part, the American Civil War stands out as perhaps the most dramatic, its consequences the most wrenching and far-reaching. Nowhere was the cost in human life greater; nowhere was the defeat of the landed classes more decisive; nowhere was the liberation of servile peoples more swift; and nowhere was the prospect of democratic reconstruction more favorable. The military victory of the North and the emancipation of four million Afro-American slaves assured the sovereignty of the federal government and the triumph of free labor. The wartime confiscation of thousands of acres of Southern land, the rising

influence of Radical Republicans in Congress, and the enlistment of nearly 200,000 black soldiers – most of whom began the war as slaves – increased pressure for further reforms and made possible a major reordering of Southern society. While the war settled some questions conclusively, it raised others whose resolution would determine the future of the postbellum South and the entire American nation.

Central to all the unresolved questions – and to the agenda of Reconstruction – was the conflict over the meaning of free labor. This conflict defined the nature of the revolution that had been ushered in by the Civil War, linked the experiences of different regions of the South, and exposed divisions within Northern society. Victorious Northerners relished the opportunity to make the South into a free society, but they themselves differed over what a free society in the South would be like and how it should be brought about. Indeed, emancipation helped crystallize a growing crisis of free labor in the North, as independent producers increasingly sank into the status of wage-earners and the gulf between labor and capital widened. The dignity of manual labor, the ease of social mobility, and the association of freedom with ownership of productive property still resonated powerfully; but the material foundations were being eroded and a new and more limited conception of freedom – based merely on ownership of one's person and the exchange of commodities, especially labor-power, in the marketplace – was gaining ground in ruling circles. Which notion of freedom would govern the reconstruction of Southern society?

If the process of social and cultural change in the North established the broad boundaries of the South's transition from slavery, Southerners – white and black, rich and poor – continually pressed upon and reshaped them. Former masters and former slaves brought their own understandings of free labor to the struggle. Rooted as they were in a social order that rested upon slavery, those understandings not only differed from, but often stood diametrically opposed to Yankee ideals. The conflict over the meaning of free labor thus occurred on several levels at once and engaged contestants with different expectations and sensibilities who commanded unequal resources and power: federal policymakers, Union army officers, Freedmen's Bureau agents, Northern speculators, former slaveholders and nonslaveholders, and the freedpeople. In every aspect of daily life and in every corner of the South, these men and women grappled with the revolutionary changes inaugurated by emancipation. Each local contest, however small, was part of the larger struggle.

In no part of the South was the struggle over the meaning of free labor more sustained, more convulsive, or more agonizing than in the South Carolina lowcountry. There the wealthiest and most aristocratic members of the Southern master class had resided. There the greatest density of slaves had been found. There distinctive and rich traditions of Afro-American economic and community life had developed. There the

Yankees had established an early foothold during the war, hundreds of black men had entered the Union army, and the first 'rehearsal for Reconstruction' had been staged.¹ And there, by order of Union General William T. Sherman, freedpeople had taken possession of thousands of acres of plantation land. There, in short, the revolutionary dimensions of the Civil War came most fully into focus.

The documents that follow offer a brief but striking glimpse of the confrontation in postwar South Carolina. They form part of a sweeping story being presented by the Freedmen and Southern Society Project. In the fall of 1976, with a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (and, later, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities), the editors of the project set out to write a documentary history of American slave emancipation, based upon records in the National Archives of the United States.² Here was an unparalleled collection of documents revealing the triumphs and tragedies of ordinary people in the midst of one of the most extraordinary events in modern history. After examining almost two million items, the editors selected, indexed, and cross-referenced more than 40,000 to serve as the basis for *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, a multi-volume history combining interpretive essays with documents. Two volumes have already reached print: *The Black Military Experience* (Cambridge University Press, 1982) and *The Destruction of Slavery* (Cambridge University Press, 1985). A third, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, is nearing completion. The number and titles of subsequent volumes remain to be determined, but the editors have begun to transcribe and organize documents for volumes relating to land, labor, and capital in the postwar period. The documents that follow are drawn from that material. They have been transcribed exactly as written, with no 'correction' or 'modernization' of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or syntax. Extra space has been added to mark the end of unpunctuated sentences; ellipses designate material omitted by the editors; words or letters supplied by the editors are enclosed in brackets.

I

Most Southern planters acknowledged emancipation as an established fact, but few accepted the new relations and behavior that free labor appeared to demand. Like masters and lords in other servile societies, they saw their dependents as lazy, irresponsible, unreliable, and wholly incapable of performing the tasks necessary to commercial agriculture without compulsion. Surrendering the prerogatives of absolute authority thus proved discomfiting enough; bargaining with ex-slaves in the marketplace seemed almost unimaginable. In a letter to the Union military commander of South Carolina, Joseph Daniel Pope, a planter on the sea islands that fringed the

coast, suggested how narrow the boundaries of freedom would be if the old masters retained influence over local affairs and the plantation system were resurrected. With the arrogance and superior airs so characteristic of the Southern aristocracy, Pope prescribed formal restrictions on the freed-people's mobility and economic opportunities — restrictions reminiscent, for example, of legislation in England during the early history of capitalism — as the only alternative to what he viewed as a retreat into backwardness and barbarism. While he implicitly noted the very different vision of freedom embraced by the former slaves, he also posed some perplexing questions that Northern policymakers would have to face.³

Charleston So Car 29 June 1865

Sir. At the suggestion and by the invitation of Gen Hartwell and through the courtesy of Gen Hatch and yourself I have been enabled to visit Port Royal and the adjacent Islands which have been in the military occupancy of the United States since the autumn of 1861; and at your request I have the honor of submitting to you my views and observations. I am sure after so long an absence that any one will be agreeably surprised and impressed with the fact that so little damage has been done to the physical aspect of the country;

* * * *

These are the general impressions made upon my mind and when it is remembered that two corps of Gen Shermans army passed through this Town its present condition and preservation are really wonderful. So much for the general aspect of things. In visiting the plantations on the Islands of Hilton Head St Helena and Port Royal I was very far from being agreeably impressed. Neglect and decay overgrown roads and badly cultivated fields were visible everywhere. In these respects these communities had gone backward quite as much as in other respects already pointed out they had gone forward. These observations naturally lead to an inquiry into the causes; and this opens the grave question of free negro labor. Can the freed negroes be made a useful and efficient peasantry? I propose to give you my views with great frankness and candor for in the present agony of the country this is no time for flattery self delusion or varnished statements. In the middle and upper parts of the State which I had but recently left there was a universal complaint that the negro labor upon the plantations could not be controled. While the planters appeared to be willing to make contracts with their own slaves and others and to engage in the present crop with zeal they assured me that the "freedmen" would not stand to any engagement whatever and the planters had no means of compelling a performance on their part. This is a grave difficulty; important to the whole country North and South. In visiting the Islands above named I was very

anxious to see how matters had worked there in the last four years. The opportunity was good for in the same community were white contractors trying to cultivate their crops with hired negro labor and “freedmen” trying to cultivate them for themselves. I visited several plantations in the first class and the crops were miserable beyond description. On one or two plantations known to be the very best for Sea Island Cotton and capable of producing with ease 150 lbs to the acre of clean cotton I saw crops now growing that would not make 25 lbs to the acre. I saw that the cultivation was very bad — no manure — no cattle — no compost from marsh and mud lying all around — no work animals — in short no system whatever. The ditches were choked up & overgrown with grass and weeds were every where seen in fields that were always cultivated like gardens. The cotton was uneven and broken and the corn in many places tasseling at three and four feet in height. I invariably asked “Why is this”? and the invariable answer was “the negroes will not work regularly or systematically”. Much was due of course to ignorance of the cultivation of the crops ignorance of the climate and of the soil but doubtless the greater part of the default was due to the *irregularity and uncertainty of the system of labor*. This *should* not be so but we are now dealing with facts. The negroes employed work when they please and do just as much as they please, they visit the neighbouring cities or plantations as they please, do not work on Saturdays at all, get paid for just what they do and rely largely upon hunting and fishing to make up for what they lose in the field; and in this way a crop that is planted for thirty hands is attended by the aggregate labor of ten or twelve hands and the result is certain failure — ruin to the master of the plantation and to the prospects of the country. Labor must be commanded completely or the production of the cotton crop must be abandoned. Many experienced long cotton planters will tell you that at certain Seasons *three* days in working it will make such a difference as almost to make or ruin a crop.

* * * *

So much for the experience and testimony of the contractor. I will now call your attention to the *independent* negro farmer. His condition is even much worse than the contractor’s for as a general thing the latter has secured the best lands. Many of the negroes that I saw and whose crops I visited had a small patch here and there of cotton corn and potatoes. Almost universally these crops will not support those who are now cultivating them. Upon inquiry I found that scarcely one of them had applied any manures; and as an illustration of the thrift of this class I will give you an example. One of my own negroes came to see me as soon as he heard I had arrived. I felt gratified at the warmth of friendship he expressed for me. After some conversation I remarked to him that he would for the future have to take care of himself; he would no longer have me to think for him & I would therefore try to help him to think a little for himself. I had during the day

seen his crop and asked him how much he had planted. He said he had three acres of cotton and four acres of corn and some potatoes. I then said to him "How much do you think your cotton will make?" "I dont know Sir" "Do you think it will make over 25 lbs to the acre?" "I dont think it Sir" "Very well I do not think it will make so much but I will allow that much and your three acres will make you 75 lbs (or what we call one quarter of a bag of cotton). "Now" I continued "how much do you expect to get for it?" "I cant tell Sir" "Well I will tell you: before the war the kind of cotton you are planting would have sold for about 25 cts per lb but I will allow you 50 cts per lb and thus estimated your whole crop will yield you \$37.50. So much for the cotton: "Now" I inquired of him "how much corn do you expect to make?" He gave me the same answer "Cant tell Sir" Well I will tell you: you *may* make eight bushels to the acre and your four acres will yield you 32 bushels of corn." He had in addition one hog and some potatoes. I then asked him how many he had in family to feed. He answered "I have my wife and three children and myself and a horse" "How long do you expect \$37.50 and 32 bushels of corn and one hog to support your family giving them food clothing shoes and paying medical bills and besides this feeding your horse? Can it last you a year?" "No Sir" "Can it last you six months?" "No Sir" "What then do you propose to do? How do you expect to live?" I said to him "Cant you get some day labor?" "No Sir there are so many people and the work is slacking off now and I cant get any." "But you must get something to do or you cant get along." He finally said his son was in the army and would help him out with his pay. This was sensible and a very good calculation. Just as long as the Government can employ in one way or another the very large number of negroes on these Islands just so long will they live. Money has heretofore been freely expended at Port Royal by the Government for war purposes but the war is now over and these expenditures must sensibly diminish. The *immorality* of both males and females has caused a large circulation of money from hand to hand but when large numbers of soldiers and sailors are no longer paid off at Port Royal this supply will fail. What then must be the result? The Government is not going to support them; that is certain. What will become of the thousands over and above the capacity of the soil to support? What will become of the crowd of non-producers at Mitchellville and Beaufort who have no trade no arts no invention? The Community will not be selfsupporting much less will there be a surplus. The example I have furnished you above will be the general rule. Those who do better will be the exceptions. Some will support themselves, some will do even better than that, but I do mean to say that as an agricultural experiment, the present Crop in and around Port Royal is going to be a failure. It is in a very bad condition now judging from what I saw and could hear and when the July rains set in to be succeeded by the August suns the tilth has been so poor that the plant will "strip up" (as it is doing even now) to the top leaf and throw off every thing. It will take what I have heard

planters call the “yellow fever” or yellow leaf. Along the Coast of the main land nothing is doing at all this season and this most valuable and wealthy portion of the State is in such a condition as to make one tremble for the coming year. The Sea Islands and the belt of country thirty miles inland have heretofore paid one half of the taxes of the State. What is the present condition of the mainland coast? Utterly prostrate and destroyed and will not yield food in 1866 for the people who are compelled to live upon it. Throughout this valuable Section the labor of the country has almost entirely disappeared; and in other parts of the State labor has become demoralized. The negro when placed under a contractor will not labor more than one third of his time — he does not care about violating his engagements — his labor cannot be calculated upon with certainty from one day to another; and when left to himself he succeeds even much worse for with his natural disposition to self-indulgence he has of all human beings the least Administrative capacity or the ability by a present combination to secure a future result. In other words he exists and lives from day to day without plans for the future. The result of all this, I very much fear will be, that as soon as these negroes in the lower part of the State have wasted or consumed or been cheated out of what they shall make in the present crop they will depredate in bands upon the interior and middle District of the State and we shall have precipitated upon us a state of things *fearful to contemplate*. The negroes are armed, the whites are unarmed. May God protect the people in this extremity. But to return: upon the valuable Islands around Port Royal the proper cultivation has been so far departed from as not only to produce present failure of crops but ultimate ruin to the soil itself if continued. Heretofore by dividing each plantation judiciously into two equal parts there was kept up a constant change of fields and pastures. By keeping large stocks of cattle the pastures were enriched by the cattle running upon them and the soil kept firm by the growth of grass and the trampling of the stock of all kind. By this judicious management the lands were kept up & in a constant state of improvement and were becoming yearly more and more valuable. By the present cultivation all these *necessary* regulations have been given up— There is no stock to run upon the lands to enrich and harden them no alternation of fields and pasture; and if the present condition of things should continue for ten years at the end of that time these Islands would become beds of “drift sand” blown about by the winds and almost too poor to germinate the seed that is put into the ground. Besides this, these Islands produced the most valuable Sea Island cotton held in such great demand in the markets of the world. To keep up the quality the most judicious system of selecting the seed had to be continued requiring the greatest care and judgment. If neglected the finest cotton would in a few years degenerate into an uneven and harsh fibre of comparatively little value. If then by the present cultivation the soil is running to waste through neglect and the quality of the cotton itself is becoming less and less valuable it would not

take many years to make these Islands an unfruitful jungle fit for the habitation of wild beasts and savages only. And to restore them after this would cost almost as much as the lands are now worth. The same sloth and neglect would also ruin the rice lands along the Coast. . . .

From the views presented both general and special the question presses itself: Can nothing be done to prevent this collapse? Can nothing be done to regulate and controul this system of free negro labor so as to make it as useful for the future as slave labor has been profitable in the past? These great questions no living man can answer with certainty. It is a gigantic experiment and of the first importance to the whole country — to the present generation and to posterity to the black race and to the white race on this continent north and South. It is now too late to look back. The past cannot be recalled. The North and the South must *come up* to the question: what can be done? To meet the issue fairly requires statemanship and firmness Statesmanship after all is neither more nor less than high common Sense exercised without passion. This is just what is required now Any system of labor whether slave or hireling must take many years to accommodate itself to any new order of things. Careful and judicious legislation from time to time will be necessary. The whole question at the North as well as at the South must be treated as a practical question and not a fanciful one. For the present I would make a few practical suggestions:

1. Let the whole white population of the South be at once let in to the cultivation of their lands and the quiet enjoyment of their homes. Those who understand the cultivation of the soil and of the Sea Island cotton crop particularly must be restored to its cultivation or we shall witness nothing but failure. These valuable cotton and provision lands are now entirely occupied by freed negroes and are groaning under mismanagement and an idle superfluous colored population, and results have been already noticed. Were it even the policy of the Government to punish for the past we would respectfully suggest that the abolition of slavery has worked the most gigantic practical confiscation of property that has ever been enforced in the history of the world. It is too a confiscation not for life but for all time. It is so much property that can never be restored again to one or to one's posterity. If we are to expect any kind of prosperity the lands at least must be restored.

2. The great number of negroes now accumulated and accumulating daily on the coast should be sent back to the places from whence they came. In and around Port Royal are negroes from every State in the South. They are there collected far beyond the capacity of the soil to support them. They are generally the worst characters of communities from which they have come. Let them all be sent back to the States or communities where they belong: Why should the community at Port Royal white or black be saddled with the pauperism the vice the disease the idleness the filth of so many negroes who are not identified with the soil in any way and whose homes are hundreds of miles removed.

3. The immediate establishment of some system of "permits" or passports by which the freed negro will be prevented from running all over the country vagabondizing from city to city and idling from one place in the country to another as is now the case. This will tend in a great degree to hold him to his engagements to labor, prevent vagrancy and remove many of the evils now experienced. It has been found necessary to have a system of "permits" in the army and in the navy and in every service where *obedience* is necessary to *success*. The soldier or the sailor is compelled to obey; and the free negro laborer must be subjected to some Similar system. In the one organization obedience is compelled by punishment both certain and secure; and in the industrial organization rewards and punishments must also be established upon some system or there can be no success.

4. The quartering of negro soldiers in a community of negro laborers must always be attended with evil consequences. The negro Soldiers are not uncivil to the white citizens but the influence is bad upon the colored population because the negro soldier sets the example (upon a peace establishment) of idleness that is injurious. He encourages habits of immorality and disipation which must destroy the usefulness of the laborer; and the contact while it cannot improve the discipline of the negro soldier will detract very much from the character of the negro laborer.

* * * *

I designed to touch at some length upon the political aspect of affairs in South Carolina, and furnish some hints at what I believe to be the temper of our people, but I have already trespassed too long. The war which has just closed was probably inevitable. Men do not usually go to war for the mere pleasure of slaying each other. A war presupposes a previous conflict of long cherished opinions that could be settled by no other arbitrament. In the present contest the South submitted in my judgement two grave questions: 1 The doctrine of state rights. 2 The question of African slavery. For forty years the statesmen and divines of the South discussed these questions without any satisfactory practical result. Who was to decide them? These two questions, however we may have differed about them and discussed them heretofore, are decided by the war. To go back after an appeal to the Sword to argumentation again would be simply childish. Our high duty is to meet the responsibility as we find it today. The stern logic of events is more potent than the most refined legal speculations. I believe that the people of the South are prepared to accept the conclusion. *Tempora mutant et nos mutama in illis.*⁴ With a liberal spirit on the one hand and good faith on the other let the North and the South wake up to a Sense of mutual obligation, to the instincts of justice and mercy, and to the fearful crisis that lies before both. If the overwhelming difficulties that surround us can be overcome let them be overcome. If *free black labor* can not be made industrious tractable and profitable let us know the fact at

once in order that it may be made to yield its position *to free white labor*. No one can look upon the future without fearful misgivings but now that the war is over we should look forward with a hopeful trust in the Providence of God and an assurance of returning prosperity to the Country if we discharge our duty. . . .

Jos. Dan'l Pope

II

Captain Charles Soule, a white officer in a Northern black regiment (the 55th Massachusetts Infantry) who served in the postwar military occupation of South Carolina, would have understood Joseph Daniel Pope's concerns. Like Pope, and like many middle-class Northerners, Soule believed that the South must continue to produce staple crops for national and international markets. But unlike Pope, Soule saw in this undertaking the opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of free labor over slave labor. Ex-slaveholders and ex-slaves, he made clear, had to learn the new rules of the game: the new requirements and responsibilities of contracting on the one hand, and the new compulsions of necessity and self-discipline on the other. The following letter and speech, sent by Captain Soule to General Oliver Otis Howard, commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, suggest that a growing number of Northerners had come to see wage-workers not merely as individuals in an early and temporary stage of the climb to economic independence, but as a relatively permanent social class. Soule thus carried the most restrictive version of Northern free-labor ideology into the South.⁵

Orangeburg, S.C., June 12th, 1865.

General. . . . Upon the occupation of this District by the U.S. troops, affairs were found to be in a very unsettled state. The "scouts" who had latterly enforced local order and preserved discipline upon the plantations, were disbanded; no civil magistrates had power to act; the planters, uncertain as to the wishes of the United States authorities, were afraid even to defend themselves against aggression and robbery; — while the negro laborers, who in this neighborhood outnumber the whites five to one, already excited by the prospect of freedom, were urged to lawlessness and acts of violence by the advice of many of the colored soldiers. Not only was there every prospect that the crops would be neglected, but it also seemed probable that the negroes would revenge themselves by theft, insults, and violence, upon their former owners. To avert disorder and starvation, officers detailed for the purpose were sent into the country to explain to white and black alike their condition under the new state of affairs, and to induce the laborers, if possible, to resume work upon the crops, — which are now in the most critical stage. It was soon found,

however, that uniformity was needed in these operations; and during the last week in May, Brevet Brigadier General Hartwell, commanding the Brigade, appointed a Special Commission to have charge over all the relations between proprietor and laborer; to supervise contracts, made under Brig. Gen'l. Hatch's orders, and to act also as Provost Judges in cases of disorder or crime upon the plantations. The commission originally consisted of four members; afterwards of five; and this number is at present reduced to two by the establishment of an auxiliary board in Columbia, S.C.

* * * *

In the two weeks which have passed since the Commission was appointed, several hundred contracts have been approved, as many plantations visited, and probably two thousand whites and ten thousand blacks have been addressed. The officers engaged in this work have frequently ridden alone and unarmed twenty-five miles, or further, from the Post, and have almost invariably met with courteous and hospitable treatment at the hands of the planters, — most of whom seem desirous to comply in good faith with the wishes and orders of the Government, and to make the best of a system of labor in which, notwithstanding, they thoroughly disbelieve.

It is found very difficult to disabuse the negroes of the false and exaggerated ideas of freedom they have received, in a great measure, from our own colored troops. They have been led to expect that all the property of their former masters was to be divided out to them; and the most reasonable fancy which prevails, is that besides receiving their food, clothes, the free rent of houses and gardens, and the privilege of keeping their hogs and poultry, they are to take for themselves all day Saturday and Sunday, and to receive half the crops. Their long experience of slavery has made them so distrustful of all whites, that on many plantations they persist still in giving credit only to the rumors set afloat by people of their own color, and believe that the officers who have addressed them are rebels in disguise. Even where they are satisfied that the idea of freedom comprehends law, order, and hard labor, there are many whom the absence of the usual restraint and fear of punishment renders idle, insolent, vagrant and thievish. Owing to the entire want of cavalry in this Department it has been found possible to investigate a few only of the cases brought before the board in its judicial capacity; and the members view with solicitude the alarming increase of vagrancy throughout the country, and the idleness, half-way-work, and turbulence of a large portion of the negro population, which they are powerless to check, except in the immediate vicinity of a military force.

In the opinion of a majority of the Commission, little danger to the welfare of society, or of the country, need be apprehended from the former slaveowners, who appear generally desirous to become good citizens. It is the ignorance, the prejudice, the brutality, and the educated idleness, — if

so it can be termed – of the freedmen, – all attributable, not so much to their race, as to the system of slavery under which they have lived, – that are mainly to be watched and placed under restraint. To supply the place of the rigid plantation discipline now suddenly done away with. Some well digested code of laws and punishments, adapted to the peculiar position of affairs, should be applied throughout the entire South. The impossibility of attaching, in future, money value to the former slaves, will break up, in practice, as the Emancipation proclamation has done in theory, the system of slavery; and the interests of the capitalists and landowners of the South will lead them to make the best possible use of freed labor: but it will be more difficult to convince the freedmen themselves of their true position and prospects. Only actual suffering, starvation, and punishment will drive many of them to work. It is a general complaint on the part of the planters that although the laborers have had fair offers made to them of compensation, including a share of the crops, they nearly all have shortened their day's work several hours, and persist in taking to themselves every Saturday.

In districts remote from our posts of occupation the plantation discipline still prevails, and cases of flogging and shooting are continually brought to the notice of the Commission from places sixty or eighty miles from Orangeburg. Nor are the planters always to be blamed for such measures of self-defence. There must be some restraint in every community, and where there are but two classes, the one educated and intelligent, the other ignorant and degraded, it is preferable, if one class must govern, that it be the former. It is to be hoped, however, that civil or military authority will soon supplant such an exercise of irresponsible power which is liable to great abuse.

A form for making contracts, adapted after consultation with a number of planters, is enclosed herewith. It was found, at the outset of our operations, that half the crop, – which General Hatch had recommended as fair compensation, was too much to give, if the laborers were also to be fed and clothed until the end of the year. At the wish of General Hartwell, therefore, the planters have been left to make their own proposals, the Commission reserving the right to disapprove such contracts as seemed unjust to the workmen. It has been found, however, that in almost every instance, the offers have been very liberal. It is usual to promise food, and as far as possible, clothing, to all the people on the plantations, both workers and dependents; and in addition, either a certain share of the crop, varying according to circumstances from one-tenth to one-half (the latter in very rare instances), to be divided among the laborers only; – or, so many bushels of corn to every hand, – usually a year's supply. In consideration of the fact that only one third of the people supported, on the average, are laborers, and that General Sherman's armies have destroyed the fences, taken the stock, and devastated the whole region hereabouts, the Commission are of opinion that these contracts are very

favorable to the workmen. It would appear that so low, uneducated and inefficient a class of laborers as these now suddenly freed, should not receive more pay than Northern farm laborers, — allowance being made for difference of circumstances. A day laborer at the North, with a large family, usually has to pay all his wages for food, clothing, and house-rent. If he can have his own little garden, and a stock of poultry and pigs, — as most of the freedmen have, he is fortunate; and if in addition to all this he gets a share of the crops — say a year's supply of food, over and above expenditures, he is prospering beyond most of his fellows. Were the freedmen to receive more, the relation between capital and labor would be disturbed, and an undue value placed upon the latter, to the prejudice and disadvantage, in the end, of the laborers themselves.

For the present year, a better condition of affairs than that now prevailing can hardly be looked for. An influx of immigrants from Europe and from the Northern States, increasing the proportion of the white inhabitants to the blacks, dividing into smaller farms the arable lands of the South, and introducing a system of money payments for labor, together with the gradual education of the negroes themselves, will, it is to be hoped, bring order out of this chaos. The plan adopted by the Commission is only meant to compose matters, as far as possible, in order that the crops may be tilled and reaped. . . .

In addition to the form for contracts, is enclosed an address to the colored people of the District, which embodies all that the visiting officers include in their speeches. All the points upon which any doubt or question has arisen are touched upon and explained in the simplest and most familiar terms which can be used.

Awaiting instructions for the future, I have the honor, General, to remain Your obedient servant,

Charles C. Soule

To the Freed People of Orangeburg District.

You have heard many stories about your condition as freemen. You do not know what to believe: you are talking too much; waiting too much; asking for too much. If you can find out the truth about this matter, you will settle down quietly to your work. Listen, then, and try to understand just how you are situated.

You are now free, but you must know that the only difference you can feel yet, between slavery and freedom, is that neither you nor your children can be bought or sold. You may have a harder time this year than you have ever had before; it will be the price you pay for your freedom. You will have to work hard, and get very little to eat, and very few clothes to wear. If you get through this year alive and well, you should be thankful. Do not expect to save up anything, or to have much corn or provisions ahead at the end of the year. You must not ask for more pay than free

people get at the North. There, a field hand is paid in money, but has to spend all his pay every week, in buying food and clothes for his family and in paying rent for his house. You cannot be paid in money, — for there is no good money in the District, — nothing but Confederate paper. Then, what can you be paid with? Why, with food, with clothes, with the free use of your little houses and lots. You do not own a cent's worth except yourselves. The plantation you live on is not yours, nor the houses, nor the cattle, mules and horses; the seed you planted with was not yours, and the ploughs and hoes do not belong to you. Now you must get something to eat and something to wear, and houses to live in. How can you get these things? By hard work — and nothing else, and it will be a good thing for you if you get them until next year, for yourselves and for your families. You must remember that your children, your old people, and the cripples, belong to you to support now, and all that is given to them is so much pay to you for your work. If you ask for anything more; if you ask for a half of the crop, or even a third, you ask too much; you wish to get more than you could get if you had been free all your lives. Do not ask for Saturday either: free people everywhere else work Saturday, and you have no more right to the day than they have. If your employer is willing to give you part of the day, or to set a task that you can finish early, be thankful for the kindness, but do not think it is something you must have. When you work, work hard. Begin early at sunrise, and do not take more than two hours at noon. Do not think, because you are free you can choose your own kind of work. Every man must work under orders. The soldiers, who are free, work under officers, the officers under the general, and the general under the president. There must be a head man everywhere, and on a plantation the head man, who gives all the orders, is the owner of the place. Whatever he tells you to do you must do at once, and cheerfully. Never give him a cross word or an impudent answer. If the work is hard, do not stop to talk about it, but do it first and rest afterwards. If you are told to go into the field and hoe, see who can go first and lead the row. If you are told to build a fence, build it better than any fence you know of. If you are told to drive the carriage Sunday, or to mind the cattle, do it, for necessary work must be done even on the Sabbath. Whatever the order is, try and obey it without a word.

There are different kinds of work. One man is a doctor, another is a minister, another a soldier. One black man may be a field hand, one a blacksmith, one a carpenter, and still another a house-servant. Every man has his own place, his own trade that he was brought up to, and he must stick to it. The house-servants must not want to go into the field, nor the field hands into the house. If a man works, no matter in what business, he is doing well. The only shame is to be idle and lazy.

You do not understand why some of the white people who used to own you, do not have to work in the field. It is because they are rich. If every man were poor, and worked in his own field, there would be no big farms,

and very little cotton or corn raised to sell; there would be no money, and nothing to buy. Some people must be rich, to pay the others, and they have the right to do no work except to look out after their property. It is so everywhere, and perhaps by hard work some of you may by-and-by become rich yourselves

Remember that all your working time belongs to the man who hires you: therefore you must not leave work without his leave not even to nurse a child, or to go and visit a wife or husband. When you wish to go off the place, get a pass as you used to, and then you will run no danger of being taken up by our soldiers. If you leave work for a day, or if you are sick, you cannot expect to be paid for what you do not do; and the man who hires you must pay less at the end of the year.

Do not think of leaving the plantation where you belong. If you try to go to Charleston, or any other city, you will find no work to do, and nothing to eat. You will starve, or fall sick and die. Stay where you are, in your own homes, even if you are suffering. There is no better place for you anywhere else.

You will want to know what to do when a husband and wife live on different places. Of course they ought to be together, but this year, they have their crops planted on their own places, and they must stay to work them. At the end of the year they can live together. Until then they must see each other only once in a while.

In every set of men there are some bad men and some fools; who have to be looked after and punished when they go wrong. The Government will punish grown people now, and punish them severely, if they steal, lie idle, or hang around a man's place when he does not want them there, or if they are impudent. You ought to be civil to one another, and to the man you work for. Watch folks who have always been free, and you will see that the best people are the most civil.

The children have to be punished more than those who are grown up, for they are full of mischief. Fathers and mothers should punish their own children, but if they happen to be off, or if a child is caught stealing or behaving badly about the big house, the owner of the plantation must switch him, just as he should his own children.

Do not grumble if you cannot get as much pay on your place as some one else, for on one place they have more children than on others, on one place the land is poor, on another it is rich; on one place Sherman took everything, on another, perhaps, almost everything was left safe. One man can afford to pay more than another. Do not grumble, either, because the meat is gone or the salt hard to get. Make the best of everything, and if there is anything which you think is wrong, or hard to bear, try to reason it out: if you cannot, ask leave to send one man to town to see an officer. Never stop work on any account, for the whole crop must be raised and got in, or we shall starve. The old men, and the men who mean to do right, must agree to keep order on every plantation. When they see a hand

getting lazy or shiftless, they must talk to him, and if talk will do no good, they must take him to the owner of the plantation.

In short, do just about as the good men among you have always done. Remember that even if you are badly off, no one can buy or sell you: remember that if you help yourselves, *God* will help you, and trust hopefully that next year and the year after will bring some new blessing to you.⁶

III

Not all Northern officials shared Charles Soule's sympathy for the defeated planters or his crass assessment of the liberated slaves' future, but most viewed emancipation as a product of government fiat and a matter of government administration. Martin Delany thought differently. A Northern black abolitionist who had labored during the war as a recruiter of black soldiers, Delany received the appointment of major in the U.S. Colored Infantry (one of only two black officers to achieve this rank) and acted as Freedmen's Bureau agent on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, after the war. He attributed emancipation to the blood and sweat of black soldiers, warned against trusting any whites, and urged the freedpeople to take charge of their own destinies by engaging in the market as independent producers of commercial staple crops rather than as wage-workers. In a speech reported to the South Carolina headquarters of the Freedmen's Bureau by a white Union army officer, the fiery Delany drew upon elements of Northern free-labor ideology and republicanism to establish the bases of the freedpeople's claims, while pressing the limits of Northern opinion about what the former slaves should expect of freedom.⁷

Beaufort, S.C., July 24th 1865.

Major In obedience to your request, I proceeded to S^t Helena Island, yesterday morning, for the purpose of listening to the public delivery of a lecture by Major Delany 104th U.S. Col. Troops

I was accompanied by Lieut A Whyte jr 128th U.S.C.T., under orders of Col C. H. Howard 128th U.S.C.T. Comd'g Post.⁸

The meeting was held near "Brick Church," the congregation numbering from 500 to 600.

As introduction Maj Delaney, made them acquainted with the fact that slavery is absolutely abolished, throwing thunders of damnations and maledictions on all the former Slaveowners and People of the South, and almost condemned their souls to hell.

He says "It was only a War policy of the Government, to declare the slaves of the South free, knowing that the whole power of the South laid in the possession of the Slaves.

"But I want you to *understand* that we would not have become free, had

we not armed ourselves and fought out our independence” (this he repeated twice)

He farther says “If I had been a slave, I would have been most troublesome and not to be conquered by any threat or punishment. I would not have worked, and no one would have dared to come near me, I would have struggled for life or death, and would have thrown fire and sword between them. I know *you* have been good, only too good. I was told by a friend of mine; that when owned by a man and put to work on the field, he laid quietly down, and just looked out for the overseer to come along, when he pretended to work very hard. But he confessed to me, that he never has done a fair days work for his master. And so he was right, so I would have done the same, and all of you ought to have done the same.

People say that you are too lazy to work, that you have not the intelligence to get on for yourselves without being guided and driven to the work by overseers. I say it is a lie, and a blasphemous lie, and I will prove it to be so.

* * * *

Your masters who lived in opulence, kept you to hard work, by some most contemptible being – called overseer – who chastised and beat you whenever he pleased – while your master lived in some Northern town or in Europe to squander away the wealth only you acquired for him. *He* never earned a single Dollar in his life. You men and women, every one of you around me, made thousands and thousands of dollars. Only *you* were the means for your masters to lead the idle and inglorious life, and to give his children the education, which he denied to you, for fear you may awake to conscience. If I look around me, I tell you, all the houses on this Island and in Beaufort, they are all familiar to my eye, they are the same structures which I have met with in Africa. They have all been made by the Negroes, you can see it by their rude exterior. I tell you they (White man) cannot teach you anything, and they could not make them because they have not the brain to do it. (After a pause) At least I mean the Southern people; “Oh the Yankees they are smart.” Now tell me from all you have heard from me, are you not worth anything? Are you those men whom they think, God only created as a curse and for a slave? Whom they do not consider their equals? As I said before the Yankees are smart – there are good ones and bad ones. The good ones, if they are good they are very good, if they are bad, they are very bad. But the worst and most contemptible, and even worse than even your masters were, are those Yankees, who hired themselves as overseers –

Believe not in these School teachers, Emissaries Ministers and agents, because they never tell you the truth, and I particularly warn you against those Cotton Agents, who come honey mouthed unto you, their only intent being to make profit by your inexperience.

If there is a man comes to you, who will meddle with your affairs, send him to one of your more enlightened brothers, who shall ask him, who he is, what business he seeks with you etc.

Believe none but those Agents who are sent out by the Government, to enlighten and guide you.

* * * *

Now I will come to the main purpose for which I have come to see you. As before the whole *South* depended upon you, now the *whole country* will depend upon you. I give you an advice how to get along. Get up a community and get all the lands you can — if you cannot get any singly. Grow as much vegetables etc, as you want for your families; on the other part of land you cultivate Rice and Cotton. Now for instance 1 Acre will grow a crop of cotton of \$90 — now a land with 10 Acres will bring \$900 every year; if you cannot get the land all yourself, — the community can, and so you can divide the profit. There is Tobacco for instance (Virginia is the great place for Tobacco) There are whole squares at Dublin and Liverpool named after some place of Tobacco notoriety, so you see of what enormous value your labor was to the benefit of your masters. Now you understand that I want you to be the producers of this country. It is the wish of the Government for you to be so. We will send friends to you, who will further instruct you how to come to the end of our wishes. You see that by so adhering to our views, you will become a wealthy and powerful population.

Now I look around me and I notice a man, bare footed covered with rags and dirt. Now I ask, what is that man doing, for whom is he working. I hear that he works for that and that farmer “for 30 cents a day”. “I tell you that must not be”. “That would be cursed slavery over again.” “I will not have it, the Government will not have it, and the Government shall hear about it, I will tell the Government.

I tell you slavery is over, and shall never return again. We have now 200,000 of our men well drilled in arms and used to War fare, and I tell you “it is with you and them that slavery shall not come back again, and if you are determined it will not return again.

Now go to work, and in a short time I will see you again, and other friends will come to show you how to begin.

Have your fields in good order and well tilled and planted, and when I pass the fields and see a land well planted and well cared for, then I may be sure from the look of it that it belongs to a free negroe, and when I see a field thinly planted and little cared for, then I may think it belongs to some man who works it with slaves. The Government decided that you shall have one third of the produce of the crops from your employer, so if he makes \$3—, you will have to get \$1— out of it for your labour. The other day some plantation owners in Virginia and Maryland offered \$5.— a

month for your labour, but it was indignantly rejected by Genl Howard, the Commissioner for the Government.

These are the expressions, as far as I can remember, without having made notice at the time.

The excitement with the congregation was immense, groups were formed talking over, what they have heard, and ever and anon cheers were given to some particular sentences of the speech.

I afterwards mingled with several groups, to hear their opinions. Some used violent language, "saying they would get rid of the Yankee employer."— "That is the only man who ever told them the truth." "That now those men have to work themselves or starve or leave the country. we will not work for them any more."

Some Whites were present, and listened with horror depicted in their faces, to the whole performance. Some said "What shall become of us now? and if such a speech should be again given to those men, there will be open rebellion.

Major Delany was afterwards corrected by M^r Town the Superintendent at that place, to the effect, that the pay of labourers on this Island is not 30 cents a day, but 30 cents for a task, and that a man can easily make from 75 to 90 cents a day. Major Delany then corrected himself accordingly, saying that he must have been misinformed.

My opinion of the whole affair is, that Major Delany is a thorough hater of the White race, and tries the colored people unnecessarily. He even tries to injure the magnanimous conduct of the Government towards them, either intentionally or through want of knowledge. He tells them to remember, "that they would not have become *free*, had they *not armed themselves* and *fought for their independence*. This is a falsehood and a misrepresentation.— Our President Abraham Lincoln declared the Colored race free, before there was even an idea of arming colored men. This is decidedly calculated to create bad feeling against the Government.

By giving some historical facts and telling them that neither Indians nor whites could stand the work in this country, he wants to impress the colored man with the idea, that he in fact is superior not only in a physical view but also in intelligence. He says "believe none of the ministers, Schoolteachers, Emmissaries, because they never tell you the truth." It is only to bring distrust against all, and gives them to understand, that they shall believe men of their own race. He openly acts and speaks contrary to the policy of this Government, advising them not to work for any man, but for themselves.

The intention of our government is, that all the men should be employed by their former masters as far as possible, and contracts made between them, superintended by some officer empowered by the Government.

He says it would be the old slavery over again, if a man should work for an employer, and *that* it must not be. Does he not give a hint of what they shall do, by his utterings "that if he had been a slave etc?; or by giving the

narrative of the slave who did not work for his master?— further as he says: that a field should show by its appearance by whom and for whom it is worked?

The mention of having two hundred thousand men well drilled in arms:— does he not hint to them what to do? — if they should be compelled to work for employers?

In my opinion by this discourse he was trying to encourage them, to break the peace of society and force their way by insurrection to a position he is ambitious they should attain to. I am, Major, Very Respectfully Your obed^t servant

Edward M. Stoeber

IV

The freedpeople of Edisto Island did not need Major Martin Delany to tell them why they were free and what rights they had earned. But they experienced in a particularly painful way the limits of the unfolding revolution that Delany referred to as the white man's treachery. Under General William T. Sherman's order of January 1865, they had settled upon abandoned plantations with the expectation of securing permanent title to forty-acre plots. General O. O. Howard, the Freedmen's Bureau commissioner, had supported their claims. Then, on October 19, 1865, under orders from President Andrew Johnson, General Howard came in person to Edisto Island to tell the black settlers that the old masters had been pardoned and would have their property restored, dispossessing the freedpeople and leaving them to hire out for wages. It was a shocking and devastating blow. In moving and powerful protests, one to General Howard and another to President Johnson, the Edisto Islanders asked the officials to ponder the implications of their decision. At the same time, they revealed the resources and vision that nourished their struggle for dignity, freedom, and economic independence.⁹

[Edisto Island, S. C. October 28?, 1865]

General It Is with painfull Hearts that we the Committe address you, we Have thurougholy considered the order which you wished us to Sighn, we wish we could *do* so but cannot feel our rights Safe If we do so,

General we want Homesteads; we were promised Homesteads by the government; If It does not carry out the promises Its agents made to us, If the government Haveing concluded to befriend Its late enemies and to neglect to observe the principles of common faith between Its self and us Its allies In the war you said was over, now takes away from them all right to the soil they stand upon save such as they can get by again working for *your* late and thier *all time enemies*. — If the government does so we are left In a more unpleasant condition than our former

we are at the mercy of those who are combined to prevent us from getting land enough to lay our Fathers bones upon. We Have property In Horses, cattle, carriages, & articles of furniture, but we are landless and Homeless, from the Homes we Have lived In In the past we can only do one of three things Step Into the public *road or the sea* or remain on them working as In former time and subject to their will as then. We can not resist It In any way without being driven out Homeless upon the road.

You will see this Is not the condition of really freemen

You ask us to forgive the land owners of our Island, *You* only lost your right arm. In war and might forgive them. The man who tied me to a tree & gave me 39 lashes & who stripped and flogged my mother & sister & who will not let me stay In His empty Hut except I will do His planting & be Satisfied with His price & who combines with others to keep away land from me well knowing I would not Have any thing to do with Him If I Had land of my own. — that man, I cannot well forgive. Does It look as if He Has forgiven me, seeing How He tries to keep me In a Condition of Helplessness

General, we cannot remain Here In such condition and If the government permits them to come back we ask It to Help us to reach land where we shall not be slaves nor compelled to work for those who would treat us as such

we Have not been treacherous, we Have not for selfish motives allied to us those who suffered like us from a common enemy & then Haveing gained *our* purpose left our allies In thier Hands There is no rights secured to us there Is no law likely to be made which our Hands can reach. The state will make laws that we shall not be able to Hold land even If we pay for It Landless, Homeless, Voteless, we can only pray to god & Hope for *His Help, your Infuence & assistance* With consideration of esteem Your Obt Servts

In behalf of the people

Henry Bram

Committee Ishmael Moultrie
yates Sampson

Edisto Island S. C. Oct 28th, 1865.

To the President of these United States. We the freedmen Of Edisto Island South Carolina have learned From you through Major General O O Howard commissioner of the Freedmans Bureau. with deep sorrow and Painful hearts of the possibility of goverment restoring These lands to the former owners. We are well aware Of the many perplexing and trying questions that burden Your mind. and do therefore pray to god (the preserver of all. and who has through our Late and beloved President (Lincoln) proclamation and the war made Us A free people) that he may guide you in making Your decisions. and give you that wisdom that Cometh from above to settle these great and Important Questions for the best interests of the country and the Colored race: Here is where secession

was born and Nurtured Here is were we have toiled nearly all Our lives as slaves and were treated like dumb Driven cattle, This is our home, we have made These lands what they are. we were the only true and Loyal people that were found in posession of these Lands. we have been always ready to strike for Liberty and humanity yea to fight if needs be To preserve this glorious union. Shall not we who Are freedman and have been always true to this Union have the same rights as are enjoyed by Others? Have we broken any Law of these United States? Have we forfeited our rights of property In Land?— If not then! are not our rights as A free people and good citizens of these United States To be considered before the rights of those who were Found in rebellion against this good and just Government (and now being conquered) come (as they Seem) with penitent hearts and beg forgiveness For past offences and also ask if thier lands Cannot be restored to them are these rebellious Spirits to be reinstated in thier *possessions* And we who have been abused and oppressed For many long years not to be allowed the Privilege of purchasing land But be subject To the will of these large Land owners? God fobid, Land monopoly is injurious to the advancement of the course of freedom, and if Government Does not make some provision by which we as Freedmen can obtain A Homestead, we have Not bettered our condition.

We have been encouraged by Government to take Up these lands in small tracts, receiving Certificates of the same— we have thus far Taken Sixteen thousand (16000) acres of Land here on This Island. We are ready to pay for this land When Government calls for it. and now after What has been done will the good and just government take from us all this right and make us Subject to the will of those who have cheated and Oppressed us for many years God Forbid!

We the freedmen of this Island and of the State of South Carolina — Do therefore petition to you as the President of these United States, that some provisions be made by which Every colored man can purchase land. and Hold it as his own. We wish to have A home if It be but A few acres. without some provision is Made our future is sad to look upon. yess our Situation is dangerous. we therefore look to you In this trying hour as A true friend of the poor and Neglected race. for protection and Equal Rights. with the privilege of purchasing A Homestead — A Homestead right here in the Heart of South Carolina.

We pray that God will direct your heart in Making such provision for us as freedmen which Will tend to united these states together stronger Than ever before— May God bless you in the Administration of your duties as the President Of these United States is the humble prayer Of us all.—

In behalf of the Freedmen

Henry Bram

Committee

Ishmael. Moultrie.
yates. Sampson

NOTES

1 See Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment*, London, 1964.

2 For a fuller description of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project and of the records in the National Archives, see *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, series 1, volume 1, *The Destruction of Slavery*, Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland (eds.), Cambridge, 1985, pp. xv–xxiii, and series 2, *The Black Military Experience*, Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland (eds.), Cambridge, 1982, pp. xv–xxii.

3 Jos. Dan'l Pope to Major General Q. A. Gillmore, 29 June 1865, Miscellaneous Records (series 4171), Dept. of the South, Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands, Record Group 393 (Pt. 1), National Archives, Washington D.C. (hereafter, NA).

4 Pope's faulty Latin was evidently intended to mean, 'Times change and we change with them.'

5 Capt. Charles C. Soule to Maj. Gen'l O. O. Howard, 12 June 1865, enclosing 'To the Freed People of Orangeburg District', S-17 1865, Letters Received (series 15), Washington Headquarters, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands (hereafter, BRFAL), Record Group 105, NA.

6 General Howard, who had only recently assumed the position of Freedmen's Bureau commissioner (within the War Department), replied to Captain Soule's report with consternation. Warning Soule that '[t]he sophistries of planters are often insidious', Howard reminded the captain that many former slaveholders believed freedom to be 'impracticable'. 'If they cannot get slavery, they try for a despotism next to it.' And if permitted to do so, they would use Union military officers to accomplish their purpose: 'Under the guise of a desire to secure order the planter wishes United States Officers to put into his hands absolute power, or at the best he asks us to exercise that power.' As to Soule's lecture to the ex-slaves, General Howard suggested that 'while we show the freedmen how freemen support themselves at the North by labor, we ought to let him taste somewhat of the freemans privileges.' Moreover, noting that '[t]he masters are prejudiced and mostly ignorant of the workings of free labor', Howard archly proposed that Soule 'had better therefore draw up an address to them, also explaining their duties and obligations.' (Maj. Gen. O. O. Howard to Captain Charles C. Soule, 21 June 1865, filed with *ibid.*)

7 Lieut. Edward M. Stoeber to Brev. Maj. S. M. Taylor, 24 July 1865, S-5 1865, Registered Letters Received (series 2922), South Carolina Assistant Commissioner, BRFAL, NA. Stoeber was a 1st lieutenant in the 104th U.S. Colored Infantry, of which Delany was the major.

8 For Lieutenant Whyte's report of Delany's speech, see *Freedom*, series 2: document 318.

9 Henry Bram et al. to Major General O. O. Howard, [28? Oct. 1865], and Henry Bram et al. to the President of these United States, 28 Oct. 1865, B-53 1865 and P-27 1865, Letters Received (series 15), Washington Headquarters, BRFAL, NA. The petition addressed to President Johnson was forwarded without comment to General Howard.