

Afro-American Families in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom

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From the beginning of African slavery in mainland North America, black people understood their society in the idiom of kinship. During the long years of bondage, Afro-American families transmitted African culture from the Old World to the New, socialized the young and succored the old, buffered relations between master and slave, and served as an engine of resistance to an oppressive regime. Early on, American slaves extended the bonds of kinship beyond the boundaries of individual farms and plantations, uniting family members who were forced to live apart by the circumstances of their enslavement. The language of kinship expressed a broad range of mutual obligation. Slaves addressed each other as brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, conferring the status of kin upon fellow slaves who were unrelated by blood. By the nineteenth century, kinship ideology and practices had extended to the larger Afro-American community. For most slaves, familial and communal relations were one.

The destruction of slavery at once strengthened and transformed the family life of former slaves. It allowed half-hidden beliefs and clandestine practices to flourish, and simultaneously endowed familiar usages with new meanings. The reconstitution of black families during the first years after the Civil War provides a view backward into the experience of American slaves and forward toward the experience of the black working class in freedom.

Freed with sudden swiftness in the course of a war that they themselves had helped to win, freedpeople reaffirmed kinship connections forged during slavery. With the integrity of their families no longer hostage to the decisions of slaveowners, former slaves put kin relationships on firmer ground. They moved quickly to fulfill

familial "duties" to distant relatives as well as near ones. Struggling to reunite shattered families, they fanned out across the South in search of loved ones sold or taken away during slavery. The reconstitution of Afro-American families exposed the moral and social foundations of a kinship that could be only partially realized in bondage.

But the black family that emerged in freedom was more than the slave family given *de jure* status. The personnel was familiar, but the circumstances entirely different. Emancipation launched the American South into a protracted, wrenching transformation in which the social relations of capitalism replaced those of slavery. Like emancipated workers elsewhere in the world, former slaves found themselves thrown into new relations to their former masters, to the state, and to each other.

The post-emancipation order brought new burdens as well as new possibilities. Although no longer subject to the personal dominion of slaveowners, freedpeople were dependent upon their own resources for their very survival. Those resources consisted largely of their ability to work. Freed with little or no property, lacking independent access to subsistence, most former slaves were forced to sell their labor-power in order to live.

Freedom thus placed new obligations upon black families. Bare subsistence, once taken for granted, became conditional. Old people, the sick, the disabled, and the young, who had been provided for by the master under slavery, became the responsibility of their kin and friends. As freedpeople incorporated aged parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, orphaned nieces, nephews, and grandchildren into their households, they extended their ethos of mutuality—a willingness to share resources to ensure the livelihood of all members of the community—to the new conditions of freedom.

Former slaves understood that their survival, the integrity of their families, and their chances for economic independence all required that they mobilize the labor of every able-bodied household member. Yet, if circumstances demanded that at least some members of every household work for wages at least part of the time, newly liberated blacks fought to shape the organization of work in accordance with their own notions of freedom. Rejecting the long hours of work forcibly imposed upon them as slaves, freedpeople generally—and women and children especially—spent less time working in the landowners' fields than they had in bondage. Rejecting the authoritarian supervision of the old regime, they struggled against gang labor and its attendant overseers. Instead, they insisted upon

work arrangements that allowed them a measure of self-direction, sometimes as individual families, sometimes in self-selected squads, which were often formed from one or two kin groups.

While working less for their erstwhile owners or other employers, former slaves organized their families' labor to maximize independent production. Freedmen performed stints of casual labor—railroad work, lumbering, and hauling, for example—in addition to or instead of routine field tasks; plied artisanal trades; or supplemented household resources by hunting and fishing. Freedwomen tended gardens, raised poultry and livestock, and took in laundry, besides caring for children and performing domestic chores. Children were assigned a variety of tasks in and around the home as well as in the fields, and whenever possible attended school during slack times in the crop year. In making their own decisions about the allocation of labor, former slaves gave meaning to their freedom.

Choices about which family members would work, for whom, at what tasks, and how much, sparked fierce confrontations between the freedpeople and their employers. Former slaveholders, struggling to regain the control they had once enjoyed over their laborers, sought to return all able-bodied men, women, and children to the fields, subject to their dictates. When they could not do so through subterfuge—using apprenticeship, bastardy, or vagrancy laws, for example—they did not hesitate to use brute force. The reconstruction of Afro-American families cannot be understood in isolation from the struggle over agricultural labor in the post-emancipation South.

Decisions involving the household organization of work also occasioned conflict within families of former slaves and within the larger Afro-American community. In many ways, freedom complicated relations among family members. Although black families were more united by the common quest for economic independence than they were divided by disagreements over how best to achieve it, all was not concord as freedmen, women, and children redefined their relationships to each other.

As emancipation introduced new forms of conflict into family life, it also interposed new modes of outside control and afforded new avenues of redress. With the slaveowner no longer standing between the slave and the state, former slaves became citizens, subject to both the protections and the restraints of the law. At the same time, a variety of Northern agents of the federal government brought to the South their own understandings of free labor and

proper family organization. As members of the army of occupation and as officials of the Freedmen's Bureau (an agency of the War Department charged with supervising the transition from slavery to freedom), these men adjudicated disputes among freedpeople and between freedpeople and their employers, introducing still another dimension to the complex transformation that redefined the domestic life of black people as it remade the world in which they lived.

The documents that follow provide a glimpse into Afro-American family life in the aftermath of emancipation. They form but a sample selected from the holdings of the National Archives of the United States by the editors of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project. In the fall of 1976, the editors set out to write a documentary history of emancipation in the American South, based upon the records in the National Archives. Examining some two million items, they selected more than 40,000 to serve as the basis for *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*. Two volumes of *Freedom* 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*, will be published in 1989, and a one-volume abridgment of the first three volumes, *Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War*, is also under way. Subsequent volumes, dealing with the postwar period, will examine land and labor, the black family and community, and law and justice.

The documents below are transcribed exactly as written, with no correction of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or syntax. Extra space marks the end of unpunctuated or unconventionally punctuated sentences. Letters or words in roman type and enclosed in brackets—[like this]—indicate conjectural readings of illegible passages; those in italics and enclosed in brackets—[*like this*]—have been added by the editors. The documents are presented with unjustified right margins, both to prevent the conclusion of any unpunctuated sentence at the end of a line of type and to preserve somewhat the appearance of a manuscript letter. A headnote by the editors introduces each document.

1

Ex-slaves held firm convictions about what freedom should mean. At the very least, the integrity of their families should no longer depend upon the goodwill and fortunes of others. They therefore welcomed opportunities to place their personal relationships upon legal footing. Even before the end

of the Civil War, thousands of husbands and wives reaffirmed unions established during slavery, often registering them in volumes provided by military superintendents of freedmen. Northern ministers and teachers took special interest in formalizing marriage relations, but the former slaves themselves pressed for ceremonies and registrations that both celebrated the new security of black family life and brought their most intimate ties into conformity with the standards of freedom. One Union army chaplain, attached to a regiment of black soldiers in Arkansas, reported that he spent much of his time conducting such ceremonies.

Little Rock Ark Feb 28th 1865

.....
 Weddings, just now, are very popular, and abundant among the Colored People. They have just learned, of the Special Order No' 15. of Gen Thomas by which, they may not only be lawfully married, but have their Marriage Certificates, *Recorded*; in a book furnished by the Government. This is most desirable; and the order, was very opportune; as these people were constantly loosing their certificates. Those who were captured from the "Chepewa"; at Ivy's Ford, on the 17th of January, by Col Brooks, had their Marriage Certificates, taken from them; and destroyed; and then were roundly cursed, for having such papers in their possession. I have married, during the month, at this Post; Twenty five couples; mostly, those, who have families; & have been living together for years. I try to dissuade single men, who are soldiers, from marrying, till their time of enlistment is out: as that course seems to me, to be most judicious.

The Colord People here, generally consider, this war not only; their *exodus*, from bondage; but the road, to Responsibility; Competency; and an honorable Citizenship— God grant that their hopes and expectations may be fully realized. Most Respectfully
 A. B. Randall

2

Not all ministers and teachers tried to dissuade unmarried black soldiers from establishing families during the war. On December 3, 1863, Henry M. Turner, a black minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church who was serving as chaplain of the 1st U.S. Colored Infantry, presided over the marriage ceremony of Rufus Wright, a North Carolina ex-slave who had enlisted in the regiment in July, and Elisabeth Turner, an ex-slave from Virginia. In the months that followed, Private Wright wrote to his bride from various military camps, and they managed occasional visits,

but their married life was destined to be brief. On June 21, 1864, his death from battle wounds made Elisabeth Wright a widow.

Camp 1st U.S.C.T Near Hampton [Va.] apl the 2[2] 1864
 My Dear wife I thake this opportunity to inform you that I am well and Hoping when thoes few Lines Reaches you thay my find you Enjoying Good Health as it now fines me at Prisent Give my Love to all my friend I Recived you Last letter and was verry Glad to Hear fome you you must Excuse you fore not Riting Before this times the times I Recive you Letter I was order on a march and I had not times to Rite to you I met witch a Bad mich-fochens I Ben [S]ad of I Lost my money I think I will com Down to See you this weeck I thought you Hear that I was hear and you wood com to see me Git a Pass and com to see me and if you cant git Pass Let me know it Give my Love to mother and Molley Give my Love to all inquaring fried

No more to Say Still Remain you Husband untall Death

Rufus Wright

Derect you Letter to foresess Monre VA

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wilson Creek Va May 25th 1864

dear wife I take the pleasant opportunity of writeing to you a fiew lines to inform you of the Late Battle we have had we was a fight on Tuesday five hours we whipp the rebles out we Killed \$200 & captured many Prisener out of our Regiment we lost 13 Thirteen Sergent Stephensen killed & priate out of Company H & about 8 or 10 wounded we was in line Wednesday for a battele But the rebles did not Appear we expect an Attack every hour give my love to all & to my sisters give my love to Miss Emerline tell John Skinner is well & sends much love to her. Joseph H Grinnel is well & he is as brave a lion all the Boys sends there love them give my love to Miss Missenger You must excuse my short Letter we are most getting ready to go on Picket No more from your Husband

Ruphus Wright

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Norfolk [Va.] August the 21 1865

This is to certify That Elisabeth Wright Appeared Before me J W Cook Notary and Counsiler Fore The Freedmen In This Department By Permission Of Maj General Miles And Swore to The Fowling Statements and the Said Testimony Was Confermed

MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE.



This is to Certify,

That Mr. Rufus Wright
of Richmond Va and
Miss Elisabeth Turner
of Barboursville were lawfully joined in
HOLY WEDLOCK, on the third day
of December in the year of our Lord one
thousand eight hundred and Sixty three.

May the God of all grace enable you faithfully to fulfil the
solemn covenant made in His presence, and after having lived
together in a state of holy joy and pious friendship, may you meet
in Heaven in perfect happiness never to be terminated.

W. M. Turner Pastor of the
Evang. Lutheran Church in Chaplain M. S. Am...

Sold by T. NEWTON KURTZ, 151 Pratt-st., Baltimore, Md.

Marriage certificate of Elisabeth Turner and Rufus Wright. (See Document 2.)

By Seargant Frank Turner 5th Sergant Co [I] Wich Said Decased
Belong to Captain William Brazzee Col John Holman Comanding
Regiment 18 Armeey Core Maj B F Butler commanding Having
Stated That Her Husband Was Killed in June 1864 Before Petter-
burgh Rufus Wright And She The Said Widdow—Elisabeth
Wright has Never Received Pay Or Allowances From the Gover-
ment And know Ask to Receive The Pay That May Be Due The
Said Rufus Wright Her Husband I have The Honnor To Remain
Your Most Obedient Servant

Elisabeth her mark X Wright
Witness his mark Frank X Turner

P.S. The Papers in Testimony I here With Enclose To Be Retured
with you Convenience

3

With the end of the war and the abolition of slavery throughout the South, greater numbers of freedpeople had opportunities to legalize their marriages. Agents of the Freedmen's Bureau, which was established within the War Department to supervise the transition from slavery to freedom, were specially charged with helping former slaves take advantage of new marriage legislation adopted by the various southern states. A Freedmen's Bureau superintendent of marriages described his work in northern Virginia among soldiers of the 107th U.S. Colored Infantry (USCI) and among black civilians living in Freedmen's Village and other settlements of former slaves.

Freedmen's Village, Va. June 1st 1866.

Dear Col: I have the honor to report to you concerning my efforts as Supt. of Marriages in 5th Dist Va. from April 25th, to May 31st, (inclusive) 1866.

My appointment from the Freedmen's Bureau, is dated April 18— 1866. From that time to the 25th, I was so much engaged in closing my obligations to the Philadelphia Committee of Orthodox Friends, relating to several schools of Freedmen (Fort Strong, and other localities), that I could give only a passing, and occasional notice to the marriage subject.

On the evening of April 25th, I preached on the subject of Marriage to the soldiers at Fort Corcoran, 107. U.S.C.I. co. A & co E. Capt. Goff of co. A. and commander of the Fort, was present, and assisted me, by reading the Circular on Marriage, explaining it—

and adding earnest remarks, which exerted much influence on the minds of the soldiers. I record for him my *thanks* for such timely, and efficient assistance. I addressed the soldiers at that Fort several other times, on the same theme: these occasions included two Sabbath evenings. At the close of service on one of those evenings—Corporal Murray (of co A), said:—

"Fellow Soldiers:—

I praise God for this day! I have long been praying for it. The Marriage Covenant is at the foundation of all our rights. In slavery we could not have *legalised* marriage: *now* we have it. Let us conduct ourselves worthy of such a blessing—and all the people will respect us—God will bless us, and we shall be established as a people." His character is such, that every word had power.

I have preached & lectured, or *talked* publicly five times at Freedmens Village. From Apr 26 to May 30th, gave fifteen certificates: six to soldiers of 107 USCI Fort Corcoran; three to 107. Vienna Fairfax county— one-107 Freedmens Village— one 107 Alx---; and four couples of citizens, all of Alexandria co. Nearly three weeks of sickness prevented me from accomplishing more. Yesterday, 31st of May, we gave seventy nine certificates in Freedmens Village. We have much more to do. Rev R S Laws, Rev D A. Miles & lady teachers, much help me. Spent last Sabbath with Capt Ross, of Vienna & the way is open for work in that region.

Yours

J. R. Johnson

4

For some former slaves freedom meant, not an opportunity to confirm in law marriages established during slavery, but a chance to end undesirable unions. Perhaps these marriages had been forced upon the parties by their owners or by other circumstances of their enslavement. Or perhaps they represented formerly meaningful ties that had fallen victim to any of the innumerable difficulties besetting intimate relationships. The repudiation of such slave unions did not, however, entail the abrogation of family connections. Instead, reported a local Freedmen's Bureau agent to the bureau headquarters in Florida, it created conflicting claims regarding the custody of children. The latter office settled the particular case of Madison Day and Maria Richard with the following unadorned statement: "the father of the children shall have control of them."

Lake City, Fla. Oct 1 1866.

Sir, The Act establishing and enforcing the Marriage Relation between persons of color passed by the General Assembly and approved by the Governor of Florida in January last, provides in what manner freedpeople who were living as man and wife before emancipation and *who mutually desire to continue in that relation* shall legalize their marriage, but fails to prescribe how cases are to be disposed of wherein the parties are opposed to being regularly joined in the bonds of matrimony.

I have had brought to my notice numerous cases of the latter Kind and would beg leave to quote the following, viz: Madison Day and Maria Richard, both colored, where living together as man and wife for seven years, during that time three children were born the oldest of whom is now about six years of age. Both husband and wife refuse to legalize their relation and both claim the children. I have carefully investigated the case and find that neither party has any plausible reason for wishing to live apart from the other, nevertheless both appear to be determined to do so. I must confess that I am at a loss to decide which of the two is to have the children or what disposition is to be made of the children. Neither husband nor wife seem to be in a condition to provide for the children in a manner better than is usual with the freedpeople, still both appear to have an affectionate regard for the children and each loudly demands them.

I will thank you to lay this case before the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Florida for his consideration and decision. I am, Sir, Very Respectfully Your obedt Servt

F. E. Grossmann

5

Because slavery had denied legal standing and protection to the slaves' family relations, marriage in conformity with the laws of civil society constituted a special emblem of freedom and respectability. The enforcement of legal marriage was therefore a matter of concern to the entire community.

Bladenboro Bladen Co. N.C. July 29 [18]67

Sir The Colored people of this place are trying to make their colored bretheren pay some respect to themselves and the laws of the country by making them pay some respect to the marriage bond and stop the slave style of living to gather without being married. there is one case in perticular they wish instruction A



Five generations of a family on Smith's plantation, Beaufort, South Carolina.
Courtesy Library of Congress.

colored man has been promising to marry a girl for the last year has been bedding with her most of the time They have had four times set for marriage but at each time he has but her off with some excuse.

The colored men of this place appointed a committee to wait on him and see if they could not influence him to do better but no satisfaction could be obtained Pleas write what course to pursue in such a case as this. Very Respect.

J. E. Eldredge

6

While granting new security to black family life, legal marriage also changed the circumstances of conflicts between husbands and wives, introducing as it did both the law's protections and its restrictions.

State of Georgia County of Chatham 24th day of July 1866

Personally appeared before me, "Capt J. Kearny Smith. A.S.A. Comsr" one Rosa Freeman "Freedwoman" who upon oath states that her husband (David Freeman "Freedman" to whom she has been married about nine months) has beaten her repeatedly, and refuses to support her. we lived at Fernandina Fla— about four

months— during that time he beat and abused me. I reported it to the Officer in charge of the Freedmans Bureau; he had him arrested & he got out of the *Guard House* & left the place, remaining away until a new officer took charge— he (my husband) then came back & beat me again— I had him arrested— he knocked the officer down & ran away & came here to Savannah. this in May 1866. since that time he has abused me & refuses to pay for the rent of my room & has not furnished me with any money, food or clothing. I told him that I would go to the Freedmans Bureau— he replied—damn the Freedmans Bureau—I'll cuss you before them. On Saturday night—he came to my room, took all his things, some four linen sheets & Some under clothes belonging to me & tore up two nice dresses of mine— he told me he would rather Keep a woman than be married—because she could not carry him to law & I could. I then told him that if he wanted to leave me—to get a Divorce & he could go— he said if I can get a Divorce without paying for it; I'll get it for you, if I can't I wont give it to you; you can go without it— I said if you want to leave me; leave me like a man! He has no just cause for complaint against me.

her

Rosa X Freeman

mark

7

For thousands of former slaves, the new legal status of black family relations was of little significance unless they could locate and reunite with spouses, children, and other kin from whom they had been separated by sale or a master's migration. All across the South, freedpeople set about reconstructing families fragmented by slavery. Philip Grey, a Virginia freedman, successfully searched out his wife Willie Ann and their daughter Maria, both of whom had been taken to Kentucky many years before. Willie Ann's affection for Philip and her wish that she and Maria might rejoin him were clouded, however, by concern about his willingness to accept her three children born since their involuntary separation, children now fatherless because of her second husband's death in the Union army.

Salvisa Ky April 7th 1866

Dear Husband I seat myself this morning to write you a few lines to let you know that I received your letter the 5 of this month and was very glad to hear from you and to hear that you was well this

leaves us all well at present and I hope these lines may find you still in good health. you wish me to come to Virginia I had much rather that you would come after me but if you cannot make it convenient you will have to make some arrangement for me and family I have 3 little fartherless little girls my husband went off under Burbridges command and was killed at Richmond Virginia if you can pay my passage through there I will come the first of May I have nothing much to sell as I have had my things all burnt so you know that what I would sell would not bring much you must not think my family to large and get out of heart for if you love me you will love my children and you will have to promise me that you will provide for them al as well as if they were your own. I heard that you spoke of coming for Maria but was not coming for me. I know that I have lived with you and loved you then and I love you still every time I hear from you my love grows stronger. I was very low spirited when I heard that you was not coming for me my heart sank within me in an instant you will have to write and give me directions how to come I want when I start to come the quickest way that I can come I do not want to be detained on the road if I was the expense would be high and I would rather not have much expense on the road give me directions which is the nearest way so that I will not have any trouble after I start from here Phebe wishes to know what has become of Lawrence she heard that he was married but did not know whether it was so or [not] Maria sends her love to you but seems to be low spirited for fear that you will come for her and not for me. John Phebe[s] son says he would like to see his father but does not care about leaving his mother who has taken care of him up to this time he thinks that she needs help and if he loves her he will give her help I will now close by requesting you to write as soon as you receive this so no more at present but remain your true (I hope to be with you soon) wife.

Willie. Ann. Grey
To Philip. Grey

Aunt Lucinda sends her love to you she has lost her Husband & one daughter Betsy she left 2 little children the rest are all well at present. Pheby's. Mary was sold away from her she heard from her the other day she was well

Long before the Civil War, black people had struggled to overcome the family separations imposed by slavery, whenever possible by freeing themselves and their kin. Martin Lee had been sold away from his first wife and other relatives in Georgia but had subsequently managed to purchase the freedom of his mother, himself, and his second wife. The abolition of slavery enabled Lee to expand his efforts to reunite his extended family—children, grandchildren, siblings, nieces, nephews. When a nephew's former master refused to give up the boy, and instead had him bound under the state apprenticeship law, Lee sought the assistance of the chief officer of the Freedmen's Bureau in Georgia.

Florence Ala December 7th 1866

Dear sir I take the pleashure of writing you A fue lins hoping that I will not ofende you by doing so I was raised in your state and was sold from their when I was 31 years olde left wife one childe Mother Brothers and sisters My wife died about 12 years agoe and ten years agoe I Made money And went back and bought My olde Mother and she lives with Me Seven years agoe I Married again and commence to by Myself and wife for two thousande dollars and last Christmas I Made the last pay Ment and I have made Some little Money this year and I wish to get my Kinde All with me and I will take it as a Greate favor if you will help me to get them by sending me a order to Carey with me to the agent of Monroe walton County Georgia I was out their last weeke and Got My daughter And hear childern but I could not Get My Sisters Son She is live and well there is a Man by the name of Sebe—Burson that ust to one them and he will not let me or his Mother have the boy he says he has the boy bound to him and the law in our State is that a childe cannot be bounde when the[y] have Mother father brother sistter uncl or Aunt that can take care of them but I went to the Agent and he says the boy has not ben bounde to him his county and if I will Give him 25 dollars he will deliver the boy to me but I think that to harde and I hope you will Sende me a order that I can cary to Mr Arnel so I May be Able to Get him without that much Money I would not Minde paying him 5 dollars and I think that far [fair] I live 3 hunderde and 25 Miles from Monroe Ande it will cost me 3 hunderde dollars to Get them to Alabma pleas anser this as soon as you get it and pleas dont sende to Georgia untill I goe it Might Make it against me anser this to me and I will let you know the time I will starte and I can get their in 2 days pleas do the best you can for Me

and I remain yours a Servent And will untill death

Martin. Lee

9

Erstwhile slaveholders resorted not only to apprenticeship and other malleable state laws to prevent former slaves from controlling their own families, but also to force and threats of violence. When John Berry, a black soldier from Virginia, returned from the war and tried to claim his wife and children, he discovered that his participation in fighting for freedom had infuriated his old master.

Alexandria [Va.], Aug. 11 /65

John Berry of Alex^a Va., vs. Benjamin Triplet of Fauquier, near Ashby's Gap, Va. Complaint of refusal to allow him to bring away his family and of threatening his life as follows:

Berry states that on Monday the 7th inst. he went to Triplets, who said he went to the d----d yankes to fight against him—told him that the war was not over yet—that the niggers were not free. He asked him for his family, but Triplet told him he should not have them—that nobody should take them away, and that if anybody come into the yard he would shoot them. Berry has wife and 6 children from 4 to 14 years of age.

10

The sale of slaves and the ownership of family members by different masters had so fragmented many slave families that the task of reuniting them after emancipation seemed nearly hopeless. When Milly Johnson, a freedwoman in North Carolina, set about locating the five children who had been taken from her, she could provide the Freedmen's Bureau with scant information to guide the search. The bureau succeeded in restoring her daughter Anna and eventually provided news regarding two other children, but clues about the others had burned with the slave traders' records.

Chapel Hill, N.C. March, 26th 1867.

Sir:— . . . It is my purpose, to advertise for my children,

When I last knew them they were 2 of them in Esics county Va^a a girl and Boy, Living with their former owners. The Boy Belonged to Hugh Billaps The Girl Belonged to D^r Richards. The Boys name was Musco Johnson— The Girl Letty Johnson This accounts for 2—

There is another two a Girl and Boy. They were sold to speculators at Richmond Va Where they were carried I do not Know. the girl's name was Henrietta Johnson The Boy William Qualls Johnson. There is still another Anna Johnson who is Living in Hertford Co., N.C. with Mr. Albert Elliott my former owner and since the surrender he took her from me I protested against but of no avail I have tried several times since to get her. I wrote to him Last year and he would make no reply to my letters. he said when he took my child that she belonged to him, and I herd that his wife said that she intended to Keep her till she was 21 years of age. all this was done against my will. Now Sir I want her. if I cannot hear from the others she can be gotten I presume

Now Sir:

You will do me a lasting favor to attend to this matter for me as promptly as possible I convey the Matter into your hands,— hoping that there can some information be gained from my children

Intrusting the matter with you sir I am Very Resptfully Sir:—

Milly Johnson

11

Although Hawkins Wilson, a Texas freedman, had been sold away from Virginia as a teenager, time and distance had neither dimmed his memories of childhood family and friends nor diminished his emotional connection to them. Twenty-four years later, he wrote to his "dearest relatives" through the Freedmen's Bureau, introducing himself to them, not as the boy they had known, but as the man he had become. His letters were forwarded to the bureau agent in Caroline County, Virginia—in whose files they remain, suggesting that Wilson's kinfolk were never found.

[Galveston, Tex.] May 11th, 1867—

Dear Sir, I am anxious to learn about my sisters, from whom I have been separated many years— I have never heard from them since I left Virginia twenty four years ago— I am in hopes that they are still living and I am anxious to hear how they are getting on— I have no other one to apply to but you and am persuaded that you will help one who stands in need of your services as I do— I shall be very grateful to you, if you oblige me in this matter— One of my sisters belonged to Peter Coleman in Caroline County and her name was Jane— Her husband's name was Charles and he belonged to Buck Haskin and lived near John Wright's store in the

same county— She had three children, Robert, Charles and Julia, when I left— Sister Martha belonged to Dr Jefferson, who lived two miles above Wright's store— Sister Matilda belonged to Mrs. Botts, in the same county— My dear uncle Jim had a wife at Jack Langley's and his wife was named Adie and his oldest son was named Buck and they all belonged to Jack Langley— These are all my own dearest relatives and I wish to correspond with them with a view to visit them as soon as I can hear from them— My name is Hawkins Wilson and I am their brother, who was sold at Sheriff's sale and used to belong to Jackson Talley and was bought by M. Wright, Boydtown C.H. You will please send the enclosed letter to my sister Jane, or some of her family, if she is dead— I am, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

Hawkins Wilson—

[Enclosure]

Dear Sister Jane, Your little brother Hawkins is trying to find out where you are and where his poor old mother is— Let me know and I will come to see you— I shall never forget the bag of biscuits you made for me the last night I spent with you— Your advice to me to meet you in Heaven has never passed from my mind and I have endeavored to live as near to my God, that if He saw fit not to suffer us to meet on earth, we might indeed meet in Heaven— I was married in this city on the 10th March 1867 by Rev. Samuel Osborn to Mrs. Martha White, a very intelligent and lady-like woman— You may readily suppose that I was not fool enough to marry a Texas girl— My wife was from Georgia and was raised in that state and will make me very happy— I have learned to read, and write a little— I teach Sunday School and have a very interesting class— If you do not mind, when I come, I will astonish you in religious affairs— I am sexton of the Methodist Episcopal Church colored— I hope you and all my brothers and sisters in Virginia will stand up to this church; for I expect to live and die in the same— When I meet you, I shall be as much overjoyed as Joseph was when he and his father met after they had been separated so long— Please write me all the news about you all— I am writing tonight all about myself and I want you to do likewise about your and my relations in the state of Virginia— Please send me some of Julia's hair whom I left a baby in the cradle when I was torn away from you— I know that she is a young lady now, but I hope she will not deny her affectionate uncle this request, seeing she was an infant in the cradle when he saw her last— Tell Mr. Jackson Talley how-do-ye and give my

love to all his family, Lucy, Ellen and Sarah— Also to my old playmate Henry Fitz who used to play with me and also to all the colored boys who, I know, have forgotten me, but I have not forgotten them— I am writing to you tonight, my dear sister, with my Bible in my hand praying Almighty God to bless you and preserve you and me to meet again— Thank God that now we are not sold and torn away from each other as we used to be— we can meet if we see fit and part if we like— Think of this and praise God and the Lamb forever— I will now present you a little prayer which you will say every night before you go to sleep— Our father who art in heaven &c, you will know what the rest is— Dear sister, I have had a rugged road to travel, since I parted with you, but thank God, I am happy now, for King Jesus is my Captain and God is my friend. He goes before me as a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day to lead me to the New Jerusalem where all is joy, and happiness and peace— Remember that we have got to meet before that great triune God— My reputation is good before white and black. I am chief of all the turnouts of the colored people of Galveston— Last July 1866, I had the chief command of four thousand colored people of Galveston— So you may know that I am much better off, than I used to be when I was a little shaver in Caroline, running about in my shirt tail picking up chips— Now, if you were to see me in my fine suit of broadcloth, white kid gloves and long red sash, you would suppose it was Gen. Schofield marching in parade uniform into Richmond— The 1st day of May, 1867, I had 500 colored people, big and little, again under my command— We had a complete success and were complimented by Gen. Griffin and Mr. Wheelock the superintendent of the colored schools of Texas— We expect to have a picnic for the Sunday School soon— I am now a grown man weighing one hundred and sixty odd pounds— I am wide awake and full of fun, but I never forget my duty to my God— I get eighteen dollars a month for my services as sexton and eighteen dollars a week outside— I am working in a furniture shop and will fix up all your old furniture for you, when I come to Virginia if you have any— I work hard all the week— On Sunday I am the first one in the church and the last to leave at night; being all day long engaged in serving the Lord; teaching Sunday School and helping to worship God— Kind sister, as paper is getting short and the night is growing old and I feel very weak in the eyes and I have a great deal to do before I turn in to bed and tomorrow I shall have to rise early to attend Sunday School, I must

come to a conclusion— Best love to yourself and inquiring friends— Write as quickly as you can and direct to Hawkins Wilson care of Methodist Episcopal church, colored, Galveston, Texas— Give me your P. Office and I will write again— I shall drop in upon you some day like a thief in the night.— I bid you a pleasant night's rest with a good appetite for your breakfast and no breakfast to eat— Your loving and affectionate brother—

Hawkins Wilson

12

Throughout the South, defiant former slaveowners searched for ways to obstruct freedom and retain control over the lives and labor of their erstwhile slaves. Among their most effective tools was manipulating the family ties of the ex-slaves. Two years after the general emancipation, an agent of the Freedmen's Bureau recorded the affidavit of Rebecca Parsons, a freedwoman whose children yet remained in the hands of their old master. By refusing to release the children, the former slaveowner had retained not only their labor but also that of their mother, who would not leave without them. When she renewed her efforts to assert her family's economic independence, he resorted to means of domination drawn from both the familiar repertoire of slavery and the new conditions of freedom: he punished her with personal violence and formalized his control over the children by having them bound under the state apprenticeship laws.

Georgia Washington County 28th April 1867

Before me came Rebecca Parsons—a freedwoman of this County who being duly sworn deposeth & saith, that she was when freed by the Government a Slave of T A Parsons of Johnson County— That she has four children now in possession of said Parsons— That when she was freed she informed said Parsons that she was going to her kindred who lived in Elbert County Ga— He told her that she might go but her children belonged to Him & she should not have them— That she was thus compelled to remain with Him— That in September last because she had hired one of the children to work with a neighbor and refused to take her and place her with Him said Parsons cruelly beat her deponent and drove her from his place thus separating her from her children

That she found a home in Washington County & in February last she went to Parsons & demanded her children— That Parsons told her "they were bound to him and that she should not have them unless she paid Him four thousand dollars" That she was

thus compelled to return without them—And she left them crying
to go with Her

her

Rebecca X Parsons

mark

13

The freedpeople's struggle to constitute their families as economic units with authority over the allocation of their own labor conflicted directly with the determination of planters and other former slaveowners to command the labor of the former slaves. In many parts of the South, especially in the first years of freedom, the labor of teen-aged children became a particular object of contention. In the hands of the planters and compliant civil officials, state apprenticeship laws, which ostensibly provided for black orphans and for children whose parents could not support them, became a means of compelling the labor of children old enough to work as full field hands. A master gained the uncompensated labor of an "apprentice" until he or she reached adulthood—an interval easily lengthened by falsifying the age of the "child" at the time of the apprenticeship. Moreover, by seizing the labor of older children while leaving younger non-workers to be supported by their parents, the planters undermined the economic independence of ex-slave families like that of Enoch Braston. Braston's affidavit is preceded by the report of an army chaplain who was serving as a Freedmen's Bureau agent.

Grenada [Miss.] Jan 10th 1866

Col. I have the honor to report the inclosed affidavits of freemen, as samples of general cases. My office is & has been crowded from "early morn to dewey eve" with complaints similar to these. There is "none to plead the cause of the poor." I am yet to know the first case where a negro has carried his cause to the civil officers & a suit in his behalf commenced, & much less justice done him by way of council or getting a settlement.

I state what from my observation seems the fact "there is no law for the darkie, that a white man is bound to respect." I have written quires of paper & sent scores of Tho's Circular No 9 & it amounts to just about as one of the darkis said when he came back, "Now Probo Maser, yus wants to git us justice, but your writins to dese peles, help us jus as much as ifs you say to us up on house top, you's got wings, & yo can fly. Wese trys it & wese come flat down!!"

And it is just so! I could send you hundreds of affidavits but such has been the crowd around the office, this cold morning is the first opportunity I could command to write. Children are almost invariably bound out from two to 12 years younger than they are. Bosworth, the white man that hired Braston & released him, told me he saw the papers over Sam who is 18 years old & sam is bound out 6 years & six moths old! . . .

The avaricious slaveholder of former days, in this apprentice law, sees a chance to effectively apply it in case of young bright & active children, & stay not for the law to be carried out by proper officers, but run before they are sent, snatching all irrespective of "orphanage, willingness or ability of parents or relatives to take care of their children. In many cases the aged parent & gradnd parents last dependance for support is taken away from them an in no instance has the negroes consent been willingly obtained, but in several instances they have said "I consented for I was afraid of my life if I did not. . . .

L. S. Livermore

[Enclosure] Grenada [Miss.] Jan 10th 1866

Affidvit of Enoch Braston (colored)

I was the slave of John Heath for twelve years. I staid with him until about the 20 of July [1865]. The crops were made & I had got half of the fodder pulled of which we all (fellow servnts were to have a third. This was all he had offered us in any of the crops.

My child had the flux, & I told him I had better go to Grenada, to get medicine for it, of the Yankie doctor. John Heath said I was getting mighty high up, & if I wanted to shew my freedom, I must get out of that yard, I could shew it there. Said never to put another track in that yard, if I did he would put a ball through me. I then left.

I went back at Christmas for my wife & famely. I had hired out, to John Bosworth & family for one third of the cotton raised & half of every thing else. I was to furnish myself—he to furnish all working utensils. Befor Christmas while I was at work with Whitticar, I went to Heaths & he offered me half I would make this year. But I told him no. I never could please him, so I thought we had better be apart. He said he could not make a bargain with me somebody had been talking with me.

I raised 13 1/2 bushels potatoes. He sold them for six bits pr bushel & refuses to let me have any of it.

Heath refuses to pay me a dime & says he will not.

He has given a shoat to others but will not let Enoch have his pig.

At christmas day I went after my family at Heaths to begin my years worth Bosworth.

Heath said I could have Enoch 12 years old Mary 8. Silas 14 month & Peter six years old—

Graves a citizen as far as I know, was then making out the papers to bind Sam 18 years old Bob, 15 years, Haywood 13, Enoch 12 years old and Delia 10 leaving me all the youngest. Heath said the Buzzard would pick me. I made no reply.

I got my wife and four children. Sam the oldest ran away from Heaths, while Heath was at Carolton to get his papers approved and Sam is now with me. After we went to Bosworths to begin our years work, Heath & Dr Bartlet came to Bosworths (6 miles) & Said Sam must be sent home that night, and if he did not come it would be wors for him for he would get officers & come after him.

Bosworth advised me to leave him for Heath would bushwhack me sometime. I did so & brought a note to Chaplain Livermore from Bosworth. I then hired out to Mr Towne for \$225. & all the family clear of all expense. My Bedding for the children and their clothing, & Bob, 15, Haywood 13, Delia 10 are all at Heaths & I dare not go after them, for when Heath (at christmas) said buzzards would pick my bones, Fanny Guy his stepdaughter had a doubled barrellled gun & said she would shoot me if I came in the yard.

14

For the impoverished former slaves—freed without land, without draft animals or tools, and often with few personal possessions but the clothes on their backs—any bid for economic independence required the full commitment of their primary resource, the labor of their families. When Joe Bright, a black man who had been free before the Civil War, and his wife and children, formerly slaves in Sampson County, North Carolina, avoided wage labor and instead rented land in neighboring Duplin County, their former master and other local whites attacked their independence by wrecking their family economy.

Duplin Co [N.C.] Aprl 26 1866

Worthy Cornell I, Joe Bright col man engaged or leased 40. Acres of land from M^r Joe Beason in Duplin Co NC to cultivate 2/3 off the crup and both partnes ar Satisfied witt this arengement

from ten Children witch i have 6 to attend with me the farm and need them all to do Said labor Also I am a mason and Plaster and can bring plenty of wittness that i am prefectly eable to Support my family by my hard labor n work and would do right well if pable in Sampson Co would not interfere with my family matters but thay broak me down three times by taken away my help on the farm (my Children) So that I am not eable to do the work on Said farm acording my promis to M^r Beson all theas Children is growing and of much use for me the youngest of the Croud is. 12 years old the other between 12 and 18 years and as mutch as I know the law do not alow to bind any Childen of a freed men whare the parents is eable to Support them or thay ar over 14 years old thay can make thare one Support as this is the case hear but still Ashaill Mathees John. Barden and frank Caroll thought thay had a better right of my Children than I had and took them from the corn feild and plow and *carried* them off to thair house I have a trial before Mager Forster and he give me order to Keep and I took my Children but now it Seemes he take the wite mans part and alow them to Carry them off and bound them out Is this justice?

You will oblige me very mutch to give me justis in case iff you pleas I have no confidence in the Mager at all the way he don with me and iff I can not justes I will apeal as long as I can Yours very respefull obeediend Servind

Joe Bright

15

The vast majority of former slaves were unable to rent or buy land to farm independently, and therefore had to hire themselves to planters as wage laborers or sharecroppers. They nonetheless struggled to reconstitute their work and family lives in ways that would reduce the direct supervision of white employers and allot more of the family's labor to self-directed activities. This struggle took many forms, including resistance to gang labor and overseers, and the dispersal of the old slave quarters into separate family plots. A key component of the same process was the widespread withdrawal of black women—especially mothers—from field labor and their attention to productive activities at home. Planters were appalled by the consequent reduction in the labor at their disposal. One planter appealed to the general who headed the Freedmen's Bureau in Georgia for measures to require black women to return to the fields. Although couched as a means to prevent the impoverishment of the freedpeople, the planter's proposal revealed how crucial the field labor of black women had been during slavery,

and it acknowledged the centrality of contests over family labor to the evolution of the new free-labor system. Indeed, as he warmed to the subject, he explicitly connected the question of controlling family labor to issues of plantation labor discipline.

Snow Hill near Thomson Georgia April 17th 1866

Dear Sir— Allow me to call your attention to the fact that most of the Freedwomen who have husbands are not at work—never having made any contract at all— Their husbands are at work, while they are as nearly idle as it is possible for them to be, pretending to spin—knit or something that really amounts to nothing for their husbands have to buy them clothing I find from my own hands wishing to buy of me—

Now these women have always been used to working out & it would be far better for them to go to work for reasonable wages & their rations—both in regard to health & and in furtherance of their family wellbeing— Say their husbands get 10 to 12— or 13\$ per month and out of that feed their wives and from 1 to 3 or 4 children—& clothe the family— It is impossible for one man to do this & maintain his wife in idleness without stealing more or less of their support, whereas if their wives (where they are able) were at work for rations & fair wages—which they can all get; the family could live in some comfort & more happily— besides their labor is a very important percent of the entire labor of the South— & if not made available, must effect to some extent the present crop— Now is a very important time in the crop—& the weather being good & to continue so for the remainder of the year, I think it would be a good thing to put the women to work and all that is necessary to do this in most cases is an order from you directing the agents to require the women to make contracts for the balance of the year— I have several that are working well—while others and generally younger ones who have husbands & from 1 to 3 or 4 children are idle—indeed refuse to work & say their husbands must support them. Now & then there is a woman who is not able to work in the field—or who has 3 or 4 children at work & can afford to live on her childrens labor—with that of her husband— Even in such a case it would be better she should be at work— Generally however most of them should be in the field— Could not this matter be referred to your agents They are generally very clever men and would do right I would suggest that you give this matter your favorable consideration & if you can do so to use your influence to make these idle women go to work. You

would do them & the country a service besides gaining favor & the good opinion of the people generally

I beg you will not consider this matter lightly for it is a very great evil & one that the Bureau ought to correct—if they wish the Freedmen & women to do well— I have 4 or 5 good women hands now idle that ought to be at work because their families cannot really be supported honestly without it This should not be so—& you will readily see how important it is to change it at once— I am very respectfully Your obt servant

M. C. Fulton

I am very willing to carry my idle women to the Bureau agency & give them such wages as the Agent may think fair—& I will further garanty that they shall be treated kindly & not over worked— I find a general complaint on this subject every where I go—and I have seen it myself and experienced its bad effects among my own hands— These idle women are bad examples to those at work & they are often mischief makers— having no employment their brain becomes more or less the Devil's work shop as is always the case with idle people—black or white & quarrels & Musses among the colored people generally can be traced to these idle folks that are neither serving God—Man or their country—

Are they not in some sort vagrants as they are living without employment—and mainly without any visible means of support—and if so are they not amenable to vagrant act—? They certainly should be— I may be in error in this matter but I have no patience with idleness or idlers Such people are generally a nuisance—& ought to be reformed if possible or forced to work for a support (and such too have [our?] business)— Poor white women have to work— so should all poor people—or else stealing must be legalized—or tolerated for it is the twin sister of idleness—

16

Even when their poverty made it necessary for all family members to hire as plantation laborers, former slave families usually tried to deal with the employer as an economic unit, and husbands and fathers often felt it their responsibility to stand between the employer and their wives and children. A freedman on a Mississippi plantation asserted his authority as husband over the prerogatives of the employer, by interfering with his wife's assignment to a task he considered dangerous. The employer countered

with a complaint before the local Freedmen's Bureau agent.

[Jackson, Miss.] Sept 2nd, 1867.

Name of Complainant. S. G. Wilson, (white,)

Residence.

Name of person Charged, Jackson Irving, (Colored)

Residence, Gus. Henry^s plan., 7 1/2 Miles from Jackson.

Charges Irving, with disobeying his Orders refusing to let his Wife assist the other Women in Weighing down the lever. to raise the Gin House,

Jacob Thompson, (Colored) Sworn, (Head of the squad,)

States that all the Women in the Squad were Working at the gin House, Jackson came and asked me what work Was to be done after the gin house was finished, then said he would get his Wife at other Work, then told his Wife to go away when Mr Wilson told Amy, (Irving's wife) to Come back. Irving ordered her to not to obey him, saying to Wilson if you have any thing to Say I am the man to talk to,

Julia Coleman, (Colored) Sworn, States that she was one of the Squad at Work, at the Gin, that the Work was not hard, and that she did not think she was doing any Work that did not belong to her. Was there when Irving Sent his Wife away. When Mr Wilson, called to Amy," Irving told to her to go on, Saying to Mr Wilson, if you have any thing to say, Say it to me,

Jackson Irving, States in defence that he was afraid his wife might get injured, he admits that he told her to leave, and told her to go away after Mr Wilson called to her, *Decision*, Jackson Irving Acknowledged he Was Wrong before the Squad, promises not to interfere hereafter with the Work assigned his Wife, and that he will himself work steadily during the remainder of the Year. Mr Wilson expressed himself Satisfied With this Settlement,

The kinship connections and obligations of the former slaves extended far beyond those of husbands and wives, parents and children. Indeed, the burdens imposed upon black families by slavery had invested all kinship ties with added significance and assigned familial responsibilities to a wide network of friends and kin. In freedom as in slavery, extended kin acted when necessary in the place of absent parents. They particularly objected to the



Slaves on "Volusia," an estate in northern Virginia, near Alexandria; photo taken during the Civil War. Private Collection of Lewis Leigh, Jr. Obtained courtesy of Michael Musick.

apprenticeship of orphaned black children to their former owners, whether under the auspices of the civil authorities or the Freedmen's Bureau. Obdurate bureau agents often believed that the grandparents, uncles, aunts, and other relatives were interested only in the children's labor, but they could not escape the demands, however inconvenient, of relatives who saw apprenticeship as nothing but slavery with a new name.

Clinton La. July 10th 1867

Hon Sir I am the mother of a woman Dina who is now dead My Daughter Dina had a child boy by the name Porter. I am a Colored woman former slave of a M^r Sandy Spears of the parish of East Feliciana La. Said Porter is now about Eleven years of age. M^r Spears has had the little boy Porter bound over to him so I am told by the agent of the Freedmen in this parish I was not informed of this fact untill after the matter of binding was consumated I do not wish to wrongfully interfere with the arrangement of those who are endeavoring to properly control us black people I feel confident they are doing the best they can for us and our present condition—but I am the Grand Mother of Porter— his Father Andrew is now and has been for some time a soldier in the army of the U.S. he is I am told some where in Califonia I do not know

only that he is not here to see to the interest of his child I am not by any means satisfied with the present arrangement made for my Grand Child Porter. M^r Spears I have known for many years. I will say nothing of his faults, but I have the means of educating my Grand Child of doing a good part by him. his Uncle who has been lately discharged from the army of the U.S.—*Umphrey cold* who now resides in this parish is fully able to assist me in maintaining my Grand-Child Porter we want him we do not think M^r Spears a suitable person to control this boy M^r Spears is very old and infirm he is and has been for many years addicted to the use of ardent spirits this fact I do not like to mention but truth requires me to speak now is there no chance to get my little boy the agent of this place will not listen to me, and I am required to call on you or I must let my Grand-Child go which greatly grieves me. will you be so kind after my statement to write to Elizabeth Collins f. w. c. Clinton La the Step mother of Porter and advise her what I shall do to obtain my little Grand Child. please answer this letter and you will greatly oblige
Truly yours a poor old black woman

Cyntha Nickols
f.w.c.

[*Endorsement by Lt. James DeGrey, Freedmen's Bureau agent*] Parish East Feliciana La. Clinton La January 29th 1867 . . . Sandy Spears is as stated Old.—but not infirm. he is addicted to ardent Spirits, but not more so than the most of men in the Parish. The boy Porter is ten (10) years of age. he (Spears) raised him from a child. My belief is, the old lady wants the boy because he is now able to do Some work. The binding out of children Seems to the freedmen like putting them back into Slavery— In every case where I have bound out children, thus far Some Grand Mother or fortieth cousin has come to have them released—

18

Some freedpeople tried to use the apprenticeship laws themselves, to obtain legal custody of orphaned children to whom they were related by blood or marriage. The following applications to a district Freedmen's Bureau officer in Petersburg, Virginia, display the assumption of familial duty on the part of relatives who were willing to provide for such children despite their own limited material resources. The third letter, from a sympathetic local bureau agent, secured the consent of the Petersburg officer to the two apprenticeships.

Amelia Co. Ho. [Va.] June 11th 1866.

M^r Barnz, I wish to have my Cousin Wilson bound to me that is staying at M^r Jefferson^s I have a house for him and will take care of him and do all I can for him my brother^s Albert and How will do the same the reason I wish to get him from M^r J^s is because he is not treated well and as he is my Cousin I think it my duty to see to him I wish you would see to it as soon as you can as I dont wish him to stay there any longer

Sallie Harris.

Amelia Co. Ho. [Va.] June the 12th [18]66

Dear Sir Charles Ganaway is Sevin years of age neither farther or mother alive & at this time has no permanent home as I married his Sister I feel it my duty to take care of him & most respectfully ask that you bind the said Charles Ganerway to me & at the proper time he shall have all that he is entitle to Respectfully

Wister Miller

Amelia C.H. V^a June 12 /66

Sir I have the honor to hrewith transmit two applications of *Cold* people to have orphant children bound to them. They are no doubt as well able as any of the cold people to fulfill their obligation. As to Mr Jefferson, he is the white mans representative on the freedmans court, and does the *cause* justice. He has the name of a hard master, but I do not know of his being cruel. He has whiped the boy Wilson & I learned that he made him take off his shirt. I do not know whether this is so or not. I propose to enquire into it. I sent the boys there with the understanding that I would apprintice them if agreeable to him, against the protest of all their relations, thinking it would be a good home. The boys belonged to a Mr Rowlett & he last winter demanded that I should feed them or take them away. Mr Jefferson after numerous promises took the boy Willson. I then found that I, Rowlett had misinformed me, and that Wilson had lived with an uncle ever since he was free; and that he had been caring for & sending him to school, He thought hard of my taking him away. I met him yesterday and he said the reason he had said nothing was that Mr Jefferson had sent him word when he got the boy that he (the uncle) should hold his tounge & the least he said about it the bet-

ter. There is a decided opposition to binding these children to cold people and I write these particulars to show you the real state of feeling and seek your advice in the matter. My object is to get good homes for these children. Wealth, power or influence does not make a good home always. The question is, in the present state of affairs, and considering the conditions of the col^d people, are they in your opinion ready to undertake these obligations. If they are and you direct, I will make the "Indentures" to these petitioners. I have no doubt in my [*mind*] that they will do all they promise to do. I am very respectfully your ob^t ser^t

W. F. White

19

Even the forced separations of slavery did not destroy the obligations of kinship. An uncle who had been sold away from Kentucky before the birth of his three nephews hastened to his old home when he learned that their father—his brother—had died, leaving the boys without parents and apprenticed to their former master.

Louisville [Ky.] November 11th 1867

Adam Woods (colored) being sworn says that his brother Pleasant Woods enlisted in the Union Army in 1864 and died while still on duty— That when Pleasant enlisted he had three children named Milton about fourteen years old. John about ten years old and Pleasant about eight years then the slaves and in the possession of Franklin Ditto in Mead County Ky

That the mother of these children was also the slave of M^r Ditto but had died before Pleasant enlisted

That in 1850 he adam was sold from Kentucky to Missouri and finally settled in Leavenworth Kansas and now makes that his home

That wanting to hear from his relations he wrote a letter to a Friend in Ky and the answer to which gave him the information of the death of his brother which answer he received about the middle of last month

That he immediately made arrangements and came to Kentucky to see about the children of his brother—

He called to see M^r Ditto and asked M^r Ditto for the children and was answered that he could not get them unless he had a legal right to them

He says that M^r Ditto Knows him well and Knows that he is

the Brother of Pleasant

He says he has Four sisters living and they are all doing well. Two of them are in this City and one in the County nearby and the other at the mouth of Salt River in Hardin County He has also two Brothers one in this City and one at the mouth of Salt River and are doing well and each and all of them are able and willing to assist in raising and educating these children

He Further represents that he is married and has an industrious wife and a good manager, and that he owns two houses and lots in Leavenworth and has no children and is well able to raise and educate the children of his deceased Brother, and his wish is to get possession of them and take them to his home in Kansas

his

Adam X Woods

mark

20

The emotional bonds of kinship and the mutual obligations that followed from them encompassed not only orphans, but other relatives made vulnerable by circumstance or misfortune. A freedman in Florida took special cognizance of the economic difficulties confronting his cousin in Montgomery, Alabama, as she struggled alone to support three children.

Milton Fla June the 18th 1867.

Dear Cousin I received word last week that you wer not doing very well in Montgomery and that times there wer very hard there Now Sarah if you will come down here to me I will take care of you and your children and you and children shall never want for any thing as long as I have any thing to help you with Come down and I will have a place for you and your three children for I Know that it is hard enough for a woman to get along that has a husband to help her and one that has not I do not Know how they do to get living these times Cousin I want you to be shure and come down if you posibly can and stay here as long as you want to if it is three or four year it will not make a bit of differance to me Sarah you must excuse this paper and ill writen letter and bad composition for I am in a great hurry and have not much time to write for I have to go to away But I shall look for you down here Please come down and make your home here with my famly Kate and the children send you there love

and best Respects and are wanting you to come down as they
 want to see you very bad your friends sends there Respects to you
 I shall bring this to a close hoping this will find you well in
 health if not doing well And I want to see you as soon as I can
 No more at this time Farewell from your Cousin

Dave Waldrop
 to Sarah Jones

Source Citations

All documents are from the holdings of the National Archives of the United States, Washington D.C. Names and titles of senders and recipients are spelled exactly as they appear in the manuscripts. The following abbreviations are employed for record groups: RG 94 (Adjutant General's Office), RG 105 (Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands).

Document 1: Chaplain A. B. Randall to Brig. Gen. L. Thomas, 28 Feb. 1865, R-189 1865, Letters Received, ser. 12, RG 94.

Document 2: Rufus Wright to Dear wife, 2[2] Apr. 1864, and Ruphus Wright to dear wife, 25 May 1864, filed with affidavit of Elisabeth Wright, 21 Aug. 1865, Letters & Orders Received, ser. 4180, Norfolk VA Assistant Subassistant Commissioner, RG 105.

Document 3: J. R. Johnson to Col. S. P. Lee, 1 June 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 3853, Alexandria VA Superintendent, RG 105.

Document 4: 1st Lt. F. E. Grossmann to the Actg. Asst. Adjt. General, 1 Oct. 1866, G-41 1866, Letters Received, ser. 586, FL Assistant Commissioner, RG 105. For the decision by the assistant commissioner, see A.A.A. Genl. J. H. Lyman to Br. Capt. F. E. Grossman, 3 Oct. 1866, vol. 5, p. 8, Letters Sent, ser. 582, FL Assistant Commissioner, RG 105.

Document 5: J. E. Eldredge to Agt. Freedmans Bureau Willmingto N.C., 29 July 1867, Letters Received, ser. 2892, Wilmington NC Subassistant Commissioner, RG 105.

Document 6: Affidavit of Rosa Freeman, 24 July 1866, Affidavits & Papers Relating to Complaints, ser. 1017, Savannah GA Subassistant Commissioner, RG 105.

Document 7: Willie Ann Grey to Philip Grey, 7 Apr. 1866, Registered Letters Received, ser. 4239, Richmond VA Superintendent 3rd District, RG 105.

Document 8: Martin Lee to Mr. Tillson, 7 Dec. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 632, GA Assistant Commissioner, RG 105.

Document 9: Statement of John Berry, 11 Aug. 1865, Miscellaneous Records: Court Cases, ser. 3878, Alexandria VA Superintendent, RG 105.

Document 10: Milly Johnson to Sir, 26 Mar. 1867, Letters Received, ser. 2686, Hillsboro NC Assistant Subassistant Commissioner, RG 105. Filed with two additional letters from Johnson, as well as endorsements and correspondence tracing the efforts of various Freedmen's Bureau officers to locate her children.

Document 11: Hawkins Wilson to Chief of the Freedmen's Bureau, at Richmond, 11 May 1867, enclosing Hawkins Wilson to Sister Jane, [11 May 1867], Letters Received, ser. 3892, Bowling Green VA Assistant Superintendent, RG 105.

Document 12: Affidavit of Rebecca Parsons, 28 Apr. 1867, P-383 1867, Letters Received, ser. 631, GA Assistant Commissioner, RG 105.

Document 13: Chaplain L. S. Livermore to Lt. Col. R. S. Donaldson, 10 Jan. 1866, enclosing affidavit of Enoch Braston, 10 Jan. 1866, filed as "L" 1866, Registered Letters Received, ser. 2188, Jackson MS Acting Assistant Commissioner of the Northern District of MS, RG 105.

Document 14: Joe Bright to Worthy Cornell, 26 Apr. 1866, Letters Received, ser. 2892, Wilmington NC Superintendent of the Southern District, RG 105.

Document 15: M. C. Fulton to Brig. Genl. Davis Tilson, 17 Apr. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 632, GA Assistant Commissioner, RG 105.

Document 16: Case of S. G. Wilson v. Jackson Irving, 2 Sept. 1867, vol. 169, pp. 52-53, Register of Complaints, ser. 2203, Jackson MS Subassistant Commissioner, RG 105.

Document 17: Cynthia Nickols to the chief Agent of the Freedmen Bureau at N.O. La., 10 Jan. 1867, N-1 1867, Letters Received, ser. 1303, LA Assistant Commissioner, RG 105.

Document 18: Sallie Harris to Mr. Barnz, 11 June 1866, and Wister Miller to Capt. Barns, 12 June 1866, Letters & Orders Received, ser. 3881, Amelia Courthouse VA Assistant Superintendent, RG 105; Capt. W. F. White to Capt. Stuart Barnes, 12 June 1866, vol. 102, pp. 150-151, Letters Sent, ser. 3879, Amelia Courthouse VA Assistant Superintendent, RG 105.

Document 19: Affidavit of Adam Woods, 11 Nov. 1867, #569 1867, Letters Received, ser. 1208, Louisville KY Subassistant Commissioner, RG 105.

Document 20: Dave Waldrop to Sarah Jones, 18 June 1867, enclosed in Lieut. L. J. Whiting to Col. O. D. Kinsman, 2 July 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, AL Assistant Commissioner, RG 105.