

**SPECIAL REPORT**

# Emancipated Citizens

Letters show that former slaves saw schooling as central to citizenship.

by Ira Berlin, Steven F. Miller  
and Leslie S. Rowland

**B**etween the outbreak of the Civil War and the passage of the Reconstruction Acts of 1867, black southerners moved rapidly from slavery to freedom and citizenship. Central to this transformation was their determination to govern themselves and participate fully in the civic life of the republic.

Securing the rights of citizenship required, at the very least, basic literacy. No less than the lash and the shackle, the denial of formal education had kept slaves enthralled. As they left bondage, they sought to master reading, writing and calculating. Attaining these skills and establishing schools were projects laden with both everyday utility and profound political meaning. Reading enabled freedpeople not only to decipher newspapers and contracts but also to study the Bible and comprehend legislative debates; writing could be used to compose a letter to a loved

one, a petition for redress of grievance or a political manifesto; arithmetic kept storekeepers honest and allowed for a fair tally of election results. Control over words and numbers gave former slaves a powerful tool to enlarge and protect their freedom.

Schools sprang up in many parts of the South even before the Civil War ended. Black soldiers who had gained their freedom fighting in the Union army hired teachers; children with scraps of literacy taught parents with none; anyone who knew a little taught others until a more skilled instructor could be found. The hunger for learning amazed observers.

At first freedpeople depended on their own resources, but as they put their education on a firmer foundation—built schools, hired regular teachers, purchased texts—they sought assistance. Help came from many quarters. Northern freedmen's aid societies shared the notion that a free people must be an

William Gladstone African American Collection



Across the South, freedpeople set up their





**own schools. In rural North Carolina, a teacher from the North poses with students before a new school.**

educated people. Religious denominations, which sponsored many of these societies, insisted that a free people must have access to God's word. The Freedmen's Bureau, a federal agency established in 1865 to supervise the transition from slavery to freedom, also placed education high on its list of priorities. Although it could not pay teachers or purchase books, the bureau helped freedpeople construct schoolhouses and coordinated the work of the northern benevolent societies.

Such assistance, whether private or governmental, did not go far in meeting the needs of the mass of illiterate former slaves. Schools receiving northern support remained dependent on the former slaves, and in many places freedpeople bore the entire burden. Across the South, communities of impoverished ex-slaves showed their commitment to education by taxing themselves, donating their labor to construct

and furnish buildings, providing room and board to teachers and defending their schools against the attacks of hostile white neighbors.

With the overthrow of Reconstruction and the ascendancy of forces hostile to the freedpeople's aspirations, the political power of black southerners withered and funding for black schools shrank. Still, the legacy of the first years of freedom survived; tens of thousands of former slaves had gained the rudiments of literacy and many had advanced far beyond the basics. Secondary schools and colleges, many staffed by newly educated former slaves, continued to train teachers. Perhaps most important, the commitment to creating an educated citizenry endured.

The documents that follow trace the struggle of black southerners to attain civic literacy in the era of emancipation. They are transcribed as written, with no correction of spelling, punctuation or syntax.



**The dream of literacy took hold in the army. Several of the soldiers at right, who are posing with their officers and teachers, hold books in their laps.**



*Few of the 179,000 black men who served in the Union army could read or write before they enlisted; most had been slaves to whom book learning was forbidden. Seeing education as a means to improve themselves and better their prospects after discharge, black soldiers eagerly attended regimental schools, which were sometimes organized at the direction of officers who valued a literate soldiery. E. S. Wheeler, a white chaplain, described the accomplishments of a brigade from Louisiana.*

**Port Hudson La April 8th 1864**

General: I have the honor to report that I have visited the schools established and organized by you in the regiments of the 2<sup>d</sup> Brigade of your Division, and respectfully submit the following statement of their condition.

There are, at the present time, four schools in successful operation. The buildings, which also serve as Churches and Lecture rooms, are large and comfortable structures, neatly whitewashed, and fitted with well made seats, desks and blackboards. The attendance of the men has been as regular as was consistent with the performance of their military duties, and they have made rapid progress in learning to read and write.

I am sure that I never witnessed greater eagerness for study; and all, who have examined the writing books and listened to the recitations in the schools, have expressed their astonishment and admiration. A majority of the men seem to regard their books as an indispensable portion of their equipments, and the cartridge box and spelling book are attached to the same belt. There are nearly five hundred men in the four regiments of the Brigade which

bears your name, who have learned to read quite well, and also quite a large number who are able to write. A short time ago scarcely one of these men knew a letter of the alphabet. Many of the Sergeants who came into the regiment six months ago, entirely ignorant of the alphabet, are now able to make out their own Rolls. Instruction to a considerable extent has also been given in the Geography of the Country, especially as regards the States, their capitals, rivers, population &c. The accomplishment of so much, under the circumstances, is an additional proof of the intellectual capacity of the race. Their extreme eagerness & ability to improve is established....

E. S. Wheeler

Chaplain E. S. Wheeler to Brig. Genl. Ullmann, 8 Apr. 1864, in Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *The Black Military Experience* (New York, 1982), pp. 618-19.

*Sometimes black soldiers organized their own schools, purchased books and hired teachers. Writing to an official of the Freedmen's Bureau, a black sergeant from Kentucky explained why education was essential in creating an informed and self-reliant citizenry.*

**Nashville Tenn October 8<sup>th</sup> 1865**

Sir I have the honor to call your attention To the necessity of having a school for The benefit of our regement We have never Had an institution of that sort and we Stand deeply inneed of instruction the majority of us having been slaves We Wish to have some benefit of education To make of ourselves capable of buisness In the future We have established a literary Association which flour-





ished previous to our March to Nashville We wish to become a People capable of self support as we are Capable of being soldiers my home is in Kentucky Where Prejudice reigns like the Mountain Oak and I do lack that cultivation of mind that would have an attendency To cast a cloud over my future life after have been in the United States service I had a leave of absence a few weeks a go on A furlough and it made my heart ache to see my race of people there neglected And ill treated on the account of the lack of Education being incapable of putting Thier complaints or applications in writing For the want of Education totally ignorant Of the Great Good Workings of the Government in our behalf We as soldiers Have our officers Who are our protection To teach how us to act and to do But Sir What we want is a general system of education In our regiment for our moral and literary elevation these being our motives We have the Honor of calling your very high Consideration Respectfully Submitted as Your Most humble serv<sup>t</sup>

John Sweeny

1st Sergeant John Sweeny to Brigadier General Fisk, 8 Oct. 1865, in *Black Military Experience*, p. 615.

*Sergeant Sweeny's appeal, which received a favorable response, was one of many requests from former slaves for help in closing the gap between their eagerness for learning and their meager resources. Seven months after the end of the war, leaders of a black church in northern Florida outlined the difficulties they faced in creating a school. Yet even as they asked for aid, they indicated how much the congregation had already done for itself.*

# TO THE Freedmen.

WENDELL PHILLIPS  
ON LEARNING TO READ AND WRITE.

BOSTON, July 16, 1865.

*My Dear Friend:*

You ask me what the North thinks about letting the Negro vote. My answer is, *two-thirds* of the North are willing he should vote, and *one* of these *thirds* is determined he *shall* vote, and will not rest till he does. But the opposition is very strong, and I fear we may see it put off for many a year.

Possibly there may be an agreement made, that those who can read and write shall vote, and no others.

Urge, therefore, every colored man *at once* to learn to read and write. His right to vote may very likely depend on that. Let him lose no time, but learn to read and write *at once*.

Yours truly,

Mr. JAMES REDPATH.

WENDELL PHILLIPS.

A public letter by abolitionist Wendell Phillips warned that literacy might be a condition of black suffrage.

Apalachicola [Fla.] Nov 25<sup>th</sup> 1865

Dear Sir, the Colored People in this Part of the State is Demanding your Special attention. We wish to have our Children Educated, and most of us are not able to have it Done. We understand that the Government is aiding the Colord People in Some Parts of the Country in this Particular, and we are Sure, that we need Some help here. We wish, if it Possible, you Send us a teacher, to take Charge of our Schools that our Children may Learn how to Read and Right, as we are, very few Excepted, wholly without Learning. the Rev Mr Kingston has Done all that he Could to Enlighten us, During his Short Stay here, and we Regret his Departue very much. he has organized us into A





A black primary school in Vicksburg, Mississippi, sketched for *Harper's Weekly* in June 1866, "embraced all ages."

Church, and has Done us A greadeal of good, in these our Dark Days. We Donot Expect, or wish, the gov<sup>t</sup> to Support us, But we wish to have A Little help as the Poor Whits has, to Educate their Children We are thankful for what has been Done for us and will be thankful for what is Done hereafter. We hope Sir that we are not Demanding an unreasonable Request, however we hope that you will give our Petition your Early Consideration and that you will Do all that you Can for us We have a good Large Church here, 35 wide—50 feet long. 40 or 50 members. 150 or 200. attends Regularly. and we have no Preacher to take Charge of our Church (white) which we Deem it Prudent to have at Present. the Building belongs wholly to us, the Colord People. We have written the Bishop, to see what he will Do for us, and we hope that you will Do all that you Can as Regards our Protection and Advancemet Mr kingston we hope will hand this Letter to you, and he Can Explain matters more fully. With the hope of hearing from you shortly, We Close. We are Sir, yours most Respectfully

Anthony Porter [and six others]

this is the voice of the Church and People

Anthony Porter et al. to Col. Osborn, 25 Nov. 1865, P-9 1865, Letters Received, Fla. Asst. Comr., Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen & Abandoned Lands, National Archives (hereafter abbreviated BRFAL).

*Sustaining schools required commitments of time and money from former slaves who had little of either, but they believed education warranted sacrifice. By taxing*

*themselves, freedpeople demonstrated their conviction that the entire community had a stake in schools. A white northerner who served as superintendent of schools at Baton Rouge, Louisiana, informed state headquarters about the freedpeople's response to his proposal that they underwrite their education.*

**Baton Rouge, La Dec 3<sup>d</sup> 1865**

Captain:....I called a mass meeting which was held last evening and it was a splendid success.

I talked to the people about 40 minutes and was followed by 3 of the most prominent Colored men of the place, and at the close of the meeting to test the feelings of the people I requested that all who were in favor of supporting the schools for their children by a system of "Taxation" to be established by Maj. Gen. E. R. S. Canby to stand on their *feet*.

The house was crowded to over flowing, probably 1,000 were present, and *every man and woman* stood erect. I say ERECT and I mean it too, for the motion was rec'd with a shout, and the house fairly *trembled*.

I told them I would send to you a report of the meeting, which was rec'd by acclamation.

Hoping you may be able to visit us now while the "iron is hot" or else send Dr Randolph I am Very Respectfully Yours Obd't Servant

Jas. C. Tucker.

Jas. C. Tucker to Capt. H. R. Pease, 3 Dec. 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, La. Supt. of Education, BRFAL.



*In many postwar southern communities, school meetings were the first public forums in which black people asserted their right to create and control their own institutions. In 1865, black residents of Vicksburg, Mississippi, mobilized to support schools that had been established during the war under the auspices of the Union army and northern benevolent societies. A committee of local leaders (including Hiram Revels, soon to represent Mississippi in the U.S. Senate) urged the community to tax itself to ensure education for every freedperson who desired it.*

**[Vicksburg, Miss. August 29, 1865]**

At a meeting of the Colored Citizens of Vicksburg held in Methodist Church Aug. 29<sup>th</sup> 1865 the following report was presented by a Committee which had been previously appointed—

We your Committee appointed to consider and report a plan for the raising of money to support Colored Schools in the City of Vicksburg for the time being beg leave to submit the following for Your consideration

We have considered three schemes for the above purpose The Tuition, Subscription, and Taxing, Schemes and adopted and recommend the latter as the one most promising and likely to succeed

To the above your Committee would respectfully subjoin the following preamble and resolutions

Whereas the Government and those benevolent Societies which have in various ways so generously and largely contributed to the support of Colored Schools in this City will render us but little if any aid in this behalf in the future and whereas we in consequence must hereafter support and aid in the management and control of our own Schools— Therefore Resolved

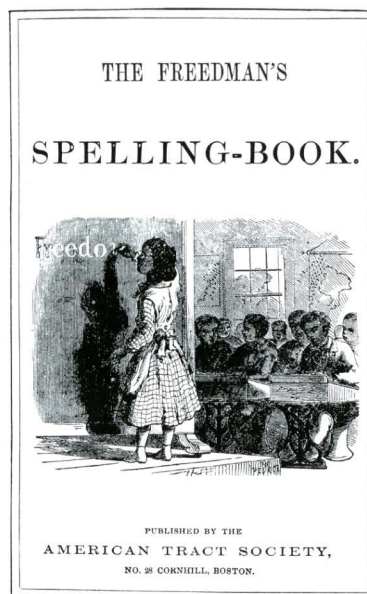
1<sup>st</sup> That we hereby tender our thanks to the Government and to those benevolent Christian Societies in the North for their liberal aid to Colored Schools in this place

2 That we having been aided so long and materially will now endeavor to the extent of our means to support our own schools and thereby evince our manhood and appreciation of Freedom and its blessings

3<sup>rd</sup> That we recommend to Rev D<sup>r</sup> Warren Superintendent of Colored Schools the taxing of every adult colored person in this City whose circumstances will admit of it in behalf of Colored schools in the same

4<sup>th</sup> That Rev D<sup>r</sup> Warren be and is hereby requested to consent to the appointment by the Colored Citizens of a general school committee Colored whose duty it shall be to aid him in the management and control of the Schools

5<sup>th</sup> That we are in favor of private or select schools on the two following conditions, viz



**Title page of the 1866 *Freedman's Spelling-Book*, with an illustration linking education and freedom.**



**Volunteer teacher Harriet Murray was photographed in February 1866 with her students Elsie and Puss.**

Courtesy of Penn Community Services, Inc.



# NOTICE!!

The undersigned intend opening a  
**GOVERNMENT SCHOOL**  
at Mt Sterling, Ky., on

**MONDAY APRIL 1 1867.**

for Colored Youths. Only 60 cents per month for first-class Education. Payments must be made Monthly in advance

**COME ONE! COME ALL!**

Elder Francis A. Boyd,  
Principal.

Mt Sterling Ky., March 16th, 1867.

Kentucky Sentinel print, Mount Sterling, Ky.

1 That they who send to them in preference to the public or free schools shall pay the same for the support of the latter that they would be required to pay if they did not patronise the former

2 That any person proposing to teach such a school shall be examined by the Superintendent and recommended by him as qualified for that business before he or she engages in teaching

7<sup>th</sup> That we are in favor of a military order obliging all colored adults in this City who can bear it to pay a school Tax

8<sup>th</sup> That we hereby tender our sincere thanks to our Superintendent Rev D<sup>r</sup> Warren and Col Saml. E. Thomas assistant commissioner of the Bureau of Freedmen for their efforts in behalf of the education and enlightenment of our Children

Signed H. R. Revels [and five others]

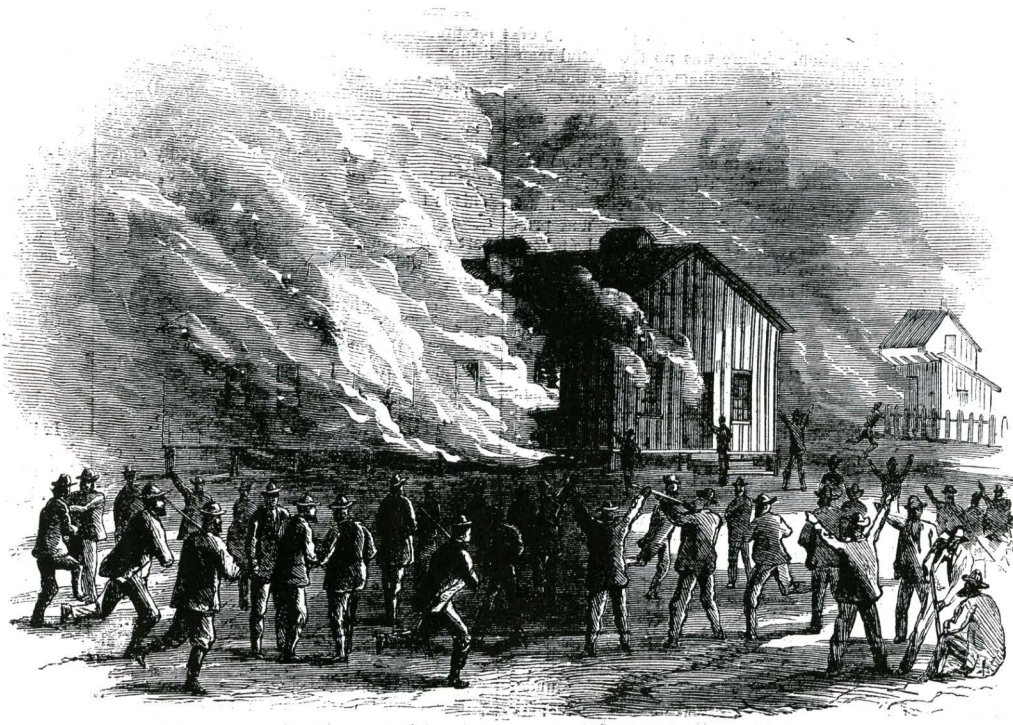
H. R. Revels et al., 29 Aug. 1865 (arr. as 8 Sept. 1865), Unregistered Letters Received, Asst. Comr. for the Western Dist. of Miss., BRFal.

A Kentucky broadside advertises schooling "for Colored Youths," at a charge of 60 cents a month.



December 1866: An artist for Harper's Weekly sketched this class at Zion School in Charleston, South Carolina.





Opposition to the education of former slaves often led to violence, as in Memphis, Tennessee, where this freedmen's schoolhouse was burned during a race riot in 1866.

*With the end of slavery, free black men and women from the North streamed south to help build a new society. One, Virginia C. Green, volunteered to teach former slaves on a Mississippi plantation. Her report to the Freedmen's Bureau, written from her home in St. Louis, Missouri, revealed the evangelical zeal she brought to her task.*

**St. Louis Oct 24<sup>th</sup> 1866**

Sir I have just received a circular from Major Ryan and cheerfully give you something like a report. I opened school on Woods Plantation on May 7<sup>th</sup> 1866 and during the four months I taught until vacation. I had enrolled 120. The increase was such that in a few weeks I needed an assistant and my cousin Adeline Sis[co] taught with me.

Sircumstances over which we had no control connected with field labor necessarily made our attendance irregular as regards our older schollars, consequently we cannot give you any average. We received none we thought under six years, and the older ones seemed to know so little about their ages, that we gave that up, I judge however there were more than 25. The branches taught were Rays 3<sup>rd</sup> Arith, written. Grammar, Geography Reading Writing &c. Our children were I may say always obedient, respectful, kind and improved rapidly. They compare flatterngly with children who have enjoyed superior advantages. The school was entirely under the control of four trustees chosen from among themselves and was supported by those alone who patronized it.

Let me thank you for the interest you take in those who in point of civilization and intelligence are beneath you. I

class myself with the freedmen. Though I have never known servitude they are in part my people. Born as far north as the lakes I have felt no freer because so many were less fortunate. I trust that at no distant day we shall not need assistance from a Government we have labored to enrich without remuneration, and fought to preserve without citizenship, or a share in her glory if she has gained a victory. History points to nations weak unto death yet have *not* died and we look hopefully to Africa and watch and wait for her restoration. We *feel* what American Slavery has done for us, we look for American Justice aided by ourselves to do *more*.

It was many long years before this giant with the iron heart and heel was bayoneted out of this land, and it may be many more of insult in various ways before we stand represented as we desire, but we are not impatient it will all come with time. who can say that it may not be now. When America weighs justice to her millions of blacks and whites in a scale that trembles and swerves to neither side. then we shall need no more armies to protect civilians, and those who are recounting dangers past, will blush for having joined in warfare so unnatural and with so foul a cause. I cannot blame the freedman for feeling every white man his foe, thanks that at this late day your honored department is teaching them better. I look forward with impatience to the time when my people shall be strong, blest with education, purified and made prosperous by virtue and industry. The people on the plantation where I have labored I see tending slowly but steadily to this point. When my most sanguine expectations are realized and we reach the apex of our greatness,



**Founded in 1867 in Washington, D.C., Howard University graduated its first class of black teachers in 1870, the year this photograph was taken. The university was named for General Oliver O. Howard (below), a founder and head of the Freedmen's Bureau.**



then perhaps I shall feel that the sufferings which led us to this goal of our ambition were right, now we cannot feel so.

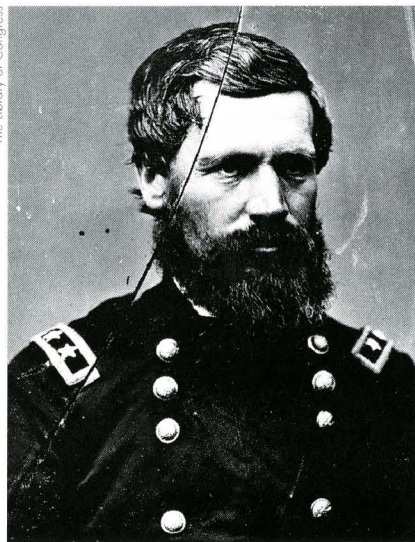
Joyfully we hail and watch for the dawn that shall rise and find us indeed "One in many."

I shall doubtless resume my labor at an early day and I am sure that any assistance whatever would be gratefully and humbly received by us. I am most respectfully yours &c.

Virginia C. Green

Virginia C. Green to A. W. Preston, 24 Oct. 1866, G-136 1866, Registered Letters Received, Miss. Asst. Comr., BRFAL.

The Library of Congress



*In the freedpeople's schools, literacy, religion and civic education were inseparable, and the lessons reached beyond the school and into the community. James Jackson, a freedman who was the principal of a North Carolina school, described to the head of the Freedmen's Bureau how he and his students marked the first Fourth of July following enactment of the Reconstruction Acts.*

**Tarboro. North. Carolina Aug 28<sup>th</sup> 1867**

Honored. Sir. I have now have now concluded to communicate a few sentences to You as I have been laboring

for the cultivation, elevation and preservation of the Freedmen for more than two Years in this place; My School was Organized July 1<sup>st</sup> 1865, and have been in successful progress ever and is now making a Noble and sure progress: and with inexpressible. satisfaction; My mode has been to perfect my schollars in practical and theoretical knowledge of Spelling, reading and writing, so as to enable them to progress in any other branch that they may be put to study: on the fourth day of July: My school celebrated the day; Edith Norfleet, not 11 years old, read the speech of Hon. S. Shellabarger, on Reconstruction; Martha Clark (10 years old) read the 10 Commandments; Annie Clark; (not

10 years old) read the Reconstruction Measures; Collin C. Shaw (not 11 yeas old) read A. chapter in the Psalms; John. H. Norfleet, (not 8 years old) read the July Number of the Freedman; all of preformd their parts beautifully which was acknowledged by all who heard them; My school was the only persons who paid any respect to the 4<sup>th</sup> day of July, in this place, or made any demonstration whatever; here, and at my school was the only place where the Stars and Stripes was unfurled to the Breeze, except when My schollars, formed procession. and



marched through streets of Tarboro; I have organized another about 8 miles from this place. M<sup>rs</sup> Emma. J. V. Jackson; Teacher; and I expect to Organize another next Monday; 8 miles from this place: My School, here, has 90 scholars attending daily; The School under M<sup>rs</sup> Jackson's charge has thirty-five attending daily; the school that I expect to organize next Monday will open with sixty scholars; I will be glad if you will send me some School Blank Reports; Our people here is poor in financial matters at this time; I would be very glad to get a donation of School Books &c for these Schools if possible; also School cards &c. I having learnt something about; an Organization, under the Style and Title of the Vanguard of Freedom; I approve much of its principles and objects, and shall proceed. at the Organize three. Divisions: under these. Titles Jackson Division, No \_\_ of Tarboro, N.C.; &c; Emma. Division No \_\_ of Edgecombe. County; N.C. and \_\_\_\_ Division No, \_\_ of Edgecombe North. Carolina; please render me all necessary aid that you can; and I will try to push. the work forward, with all possible energy and perseverance and perfection; I hope to hear from you soon; My Object is cultivation elevation and preservation; Liberty Union, Humanity and Equality before the Law. to all men. without regard to race or color; on these platforms I firmly stand; and ever expect to disseminate these principles: Very Respectfully & Truly Yours

Ja<sup>s</sup> H. M. Jackson

Ja<sup>s</sup> H. M. Jackson to Major Gen. O. O. Howard, 28 Aug. 1867, J-6 1867, Letters Received, Education Division, Washington Hdqrs., BRFAL.

*The documents printed in this article are among some 50,000 selected from the holdings of the National Archives of the United States by the Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland in College Park. Documents from the*

*project's collection are being published in a multivolume series, Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867 (Cambridge University Press). An abridgment of the first four volumes, Free At Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War (The New Press), is available in paperback.*

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**Paintings such as Winslow Homer's *Taking Sunflower to Teacher* expressed a sympathetic interest in the education of the South's newly emancipated blacks.**

George Museum of Art, University of Georgia. Eva Underhill Holbrook Memorial Collection of American Art. Gift of Alfred H. Holbrook.