

The Moment of Freedom

No event in American history matches the drama of emancipation. More than a century later, it continues to stir the deepest emotions, and properly so. Emancipation accompanied the military defeat of the world's most powerful slaveholding class and freed a larger number of slaves than lived in all other New World slave societies combined. Clothed in the rhetoric of biblical prophecy and national destiny and born of a bloody civil war, it accomplished a profound social revolution.

The death of slavery led to an intense period of social reconstruction, closely supervised by the victorious North. Former slaves confronted former masters as free laborers in a system predicated upon contractual equality between employer and employee. They gained, if only temporarily, such citizenship rights as the right to vote and hold public office. Emancipation represented the moment of truth, its acid test. The upheaval of conventional

Company F. 13th U.S. Colored Infantry
Nashville Tenn
Exchange Barracks
October 8th 1865

Sir
I have the honor to call your attention
to the necessity of having a school for
the benefit of our regiment We have never
had an institution of that sort and we
stand deeply in need of instruction the
majority of us having been slaves We
wish to have some benefit of education
in the future We have established a literary
association which flourished previous to our
march to Nashville We wish to become a
people capable of self support as we are
lucky where prejudice reigns like the
mountain oak and do lack that cultivation
of mind that would have an attendance
been in the United States service I had
a furlough and it was after I had
see my race of people there neglected
and ill treated on the account of their
complaints or applications in
of Education totally neglected
good workings in our
behalf We
are

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expectations stripped away the patina of routine, exposing the cross purposes and warring intentions that had simmered — often unnoticed — beneath the surface of the old order.

Faced with unprecedented events, ordinary men and women become extraordinarily perceptive and articulate. Blacks at this moment of revolutionary transformation were no exception. The actions of the timid and reluctant as much as those of the bold and eager expose the inner workings of society.

Former masters struggled to impose new constraints, but freedpeople nonetheless asserted their independence through direct speech and yet more direct action. An extraordinary number of ex-slaves, many of them newly literate, put pen to paper in the early years of freedom. Hundreds of others, entirely illiterate, gave depositions to government officials, placed their mark on resolutions passed at meetings, testified in courts and dictated letters to more literate blacks and to white officials and teachers.

Numerous federal agencies recorded the testimony of people generally dismissed as historically mute, so emancipation in the American South has left behind an unparalleled documentation of the thoughts and actions of men and women just out of bondage. The work of these government agencies placed them in close contact with ordinary people of all sorts, and their bureaucratic structures provided a mechanism for the preservation, if not resolution, of people's protests and pleas.

One agency, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands — better known as the Freedmen's Bureau — illustrates the point. Although the bureau often failed to do more than make written note of the abuse of freedpeople brought to its attention, its agents across the South conducted censuses, undertook investigations, recorded depositions, filed reports and accumulated letters authored by ex-slaves and interested whites. Other agencies created thousands of similar, though more dispersed, records. Together, these records, now housed in the National Archives of the United States in Washington, provide the fullest documentation anywhere of the liberation of any people and the simultaneous transformation of an entire society.

The materials convey, as no historian can, the experiences of the liberated: the quiet personal satisfaction of meeting an old master on equal terms, as well as the outrage of being ejected from a segregated street car; the elation of a fugitive enlisting in the Union Army and the humiliation of a laborer cheated out of hard-earned wages; the joy of a family reunion after years of forced separation and the distress of having a child involuntarily apprenticed to a former owner; the hope that freedom would bring a new world and the fear that, in so many ways, life would be much as before.

In the fall of 1976, with a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, and under the sponsorship of the University of Maryland, the Freedmen and Southern Society project launched a systematic search of records at the National Archives that could yield a documentary history of emancipation. The editors selected more than 40,000 items, representing perhaps two percent of the documents they examined. Indexed and cross-referenced topically, chronologically and geographically, their selection is the basis for *Freedom*, a multi-volume documentary history of emancipation to be published by Cambridge University Press. The first volume of *Freedom*, entitled *The Black Military Experience, 1861-1867*, will appear in the fall of 1982.

The editors of the series — Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Joseph P. Reidy and Leslie S. Rowland — have assisted *Southern Exposure* in presenting a sample of the material here.



MISSOURI BLACK SOLDIER TO
HIS ENSLAVED DAUGHTERS
AND THEIR OWNER

The Emancipation Proclamation and the advance of the Union army into the Confederate interior marked the beginning of freedom for blacks. But many slaves did not wait for freedom to

come to them. Long before Lincoln's proclamation, they fled slavery, leaving bondage, as they had entered it, with little more than the clothes on their backs. Some of them took refuge within Union lines, where federal officers first employed them as laborers and — after Washington signaled approval — enlisted the able-bodied men as soldiers in the Union army.

The transformation of slaves into soldiers altered the expectations of former slaves and their old masters. Once black men donned Union blue, nothing was the same. The following letters from Private Spotswood Rice, a former slave from Missouri, to his children and to the children's owner, suggest how military enlistment made loving fathers into fierce liberators.

[Benton Barracks Hospital, St. Louis, Mo., September 3, 1864]

My Children

I take my pen in hand to rite you A few lines to let you know that I have not forgot you and that I want to see you as bad as ever now my dear Children I want you to be contented with whatever may be your lots be assured that I will have you if it cost me my life on the 28th of the mounth. 8 hundred White and 8 hundred blacke soldiers expects to start up the rivore to Glasgow and above there thats to be jeneraled by a jeneral that will give me both of you when they Come I expect to be with, them and expect to get you both in return. Dont be uneasy my children I expect to have you. If Diggs dont give you up this Government will and I feel confident that I will get you Your Miss Kaitty said that I tried to steal you But I'll let her know that god never intended for man to steal his own flesh and blood. If I had no cofidence in God I could have cofidence in her But as it is If I ever had any Cofidence in her I have none now and never expect to have And I want her to remember if she meets me with ten thousand soldiers she [will?] meet her enemy I once [thought] that I had some respect for them but now my respects is worn out and have no sympathy for Slaveholders. And as for her cristianantty I expect the



KENTUCKY BLACK SERGEANT TO
TENNESSEE FREEDMEN'S
BUREAU ASSISTANT
COMMISSIONER

Throughout most of the war and in the post-war years, it fell to black non-commissioned officers to represent their men and to articulate their aspirations. John Sweeny, a free black boatman from Kentucky who rose to the rank of sergeant, acted forcefully to establish a school for his regiment. In so doing, he explained why so many blacks, whether freeborn or freed, believed education to be essential to their newly won status.

Nashville Tenn October 8th 1865

Sir

I have the honor to call your attention To the necessity of having a school for The benefit of our regiment 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 flourished 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

Devil has Such in hell You tell her from me that She is the frist Christian that I ever hard say that aman could Steal his own child especially out of human bondage

You can tell her that She can hold to you as long as she can I never would expect to ask her again to let you come to me because I know that the devil has got her hot set againsts that that is write now my Dear children I am a going to close my letter to you Give my love to all enquiring friends tell them all that we are well and want to see them very much and Corra and Mary receive the greater part of it you sefves and dont think hard of us not sending you any thing I you father have a plenty for you when I see you Spott & Noah sends their love to both of you Oh! My Dear children how I do want to see you

[Spotswood Rice] *

[Benton Barracks Hospital, St. Louis, Mo., September 3, 1864]

I received a leteter from Cariline telling me that you say I tried to steal to plunder my child away from you now I want you to understand that mary is my Child and she is a God given rite of my own and you may hold on to hear as long as you can but I want you to remembor this one thing that the longor you keep my Child from me the longor you will have to burn in hell and the qwicer youll get their for we are now making up a bout one thoughtsand blacke troops to Come up thorough and wont to come through Glasgow and when we come wo be to Copperhood rabbels and to the Slaveholding rebbels for we dont expect to leave them there root near branch but we thinke how ever that we that have Children in the hands of you devels we will trie your [vertues?] the day that we enter Glasgow I want you to understand kittey diggs that where ever you and I meets we are enmays to each orther I offered once to pay you forty dollers for my own Child but I am glad

* Rice, a tobacco roller and the slave of one Benjamin Lewis, had enlisted in early February, 1864, at Glasgow, Missouri. On the date of this letter, he was hospitalized with chronic rheumatism.

now that you did not accept it Just hold on now as long as you can and the worse it will be for you you never in you life befor I came down hear did you give Children any thing not eny thing whatever not even a dollers worth of expencs now you call my children your pro[per]ty not so with me my Children is my own and I expect to get them and when I get ready to come after mary I will have bout a powrer and autherity to bring hear away and to exacute vengencens on them that holds my Child you will then know how to talke to me I will assure that and you will know how to talk rite too I want you now to just hold on to hear if you want to iff your conchosome tells thats the road go that road and what it will brig you to kittey diggs I have no fears about geting mary out of your hands this whole Government gives chear to me and you cannot help your self

— Spotswood Rice*



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^t

John Sweeny*



TEXAS FREEDMAN TO THE
VIRGINIA FREEDMEN'S BUREAU
ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER

Like John Sweeny, blacks found many ways to give meaning to their liberty in the years following the war. In addition to establishing schools, they took new names, found new residences, sought new employment and organized churches and fraternal societies. But nothing more fully represented the new world of freedom than the reconstruction of black family life. During slave times, masters had sold black men and women throughout the South to suit their own purposes, separating husbands from wives, parents from children, and brothers from sisters, changing their names and otherwise obscuring their family connections. As a result, reconstituting family ties was no mean task. Nonetheless, blacks took it up with enthusiasm, often looking to the Freedmen's Bureau and other governmental agencies to facilitate the search and even to provide transportation for a distant loved one. One such inquiry came from Hawkins Wilson, a Virginian who had been sold to Texas as a young man and who wished to find his sister and through her his other relatives.

[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] [Galveston, Tex.,
May 11, 1867]

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 Episcooal 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

* Pencilled on this letter is the notation, "Will send Teacher as soon as possible." Sweeny, a free black from Green County, Kentucky, enlisted in Nashville in September, 1863, giving his occupation as "boatman." Upon muster-out in January, 1866, he returned to his home county and taught a school whose pupils included many wives and children of other black soldiers still in service.

** The records do not indicate whether Wilson's kin were located.

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 now as well we used to be We can meet as 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 one 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 someday 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

