

**ALADDIN'S LAMP;
EDUCATION IN FREEDMAN'S VILLAGE**

By

Bobbi Schildt

O dark, sad millions,—patiently and dumb
Waiting for God,—your hour, at last, has come,
And Freedom's song
Breaks the long silence of your night of wrong.¹

—John G. Whittier

Freed people of color struggled to face numerous challenges during Reconstruction and into the twentieth century.² Some of the problems included: prejudice, forced labor contracts, violence, limitations on work and learning, sharecropping, and treatment as second class citizens. In addition, homelessness, poverty, ignorance, and illiteracy, along with the hindrance of wavering governmental support, kept freedmen from full equal opportunity. Despite these hardships, increasing numbers of freed people of color such as the residents of Freedman's Village became educated during this time.

In the ante-bellum period, most slaves were denied an education or even basic literacy. The owners wanted to keep their slaves laboring for them. Slave owners feared that a study of geography would help their slaves to learn to read maps and find their way north and away from their control. Other owners felt that if slaves were taught to write they might forge traveling passes and thwart the patrol system. In addition, the slave holders were apprehensive that arithmetic would teach slaves the value of money, and that they might no longer be duped through deception. Also, slave owners were concerned that if slaves discovered too much about the outside world by reading the news they would not accept their stations in life as farm or house laborers. Slave holders wanted in general to enforce subordination as well as to deal with these specific problems. Therefore, slave owners generally denied educational opportunity to their slaves.

When freedom came, the former slaves expected to see many changes in their lives. Education was a top priority for many freed people of color and



Contraband School located in Freedman's Village, Arlington, Virginia. The School also served as a church. (Matthew Brady Collection Library of Congress)

their children. Some believed that education would be like Aladdin's lamp, which could help them attain their wishes for social, economic, civil, and political equality. Some wanted to learn the basics so that they could run their own businesses. Many a freedman wanted the skills to read the Bible, write a letter or sign his name to a legal paper instead of an "X" to represent it. Because of these many motivations, the desire of the freed people to improve their lives through education led them through the schoolhouse door.

Freedmen's schools were established throughout the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction. One such school was opened in Freedman's Village, on Arlington Heights, Virginia. Freedman's Village was considered a model camp for contrabands.³ The village school, set up within sight of the nation's Capitol, was among the first freedmen's schools which provided for a systematic education. Although not without its problems, the school in Freedman's Village provided the basics of instruction to assist newly freed slaves in the transition from slavery to freedom.

During the war and Reconstruction period more than fifty religious and secular organizations helped educate the freedmen. Many philanthropic and benevolent groups first sent teachers south in coordination with the agents of the Treasury and War Departments. Some saw these groups as crusaders while others saw them as unwelcome guests who were trying to interfere with the affairs of the South. Still others believed that this influx of outsiders was a planned move to control the elections. Often the object of ridicule and sub-

ject to violence such as personal attacks, the life of the freedmen's teachers was challenging and at times threatening. In an incident in nearby Falls Church, the father of B. J. Read, a teacher of the freedmen under the charge of Emily Howland of Arlington, was shot by Rebels in October of 1864. Despite the reception they received the teachers ventured south.

As the War drew to a close, the Freedmen's Bureau took on the responsibilities of the War and Treasury Departments. Created on March 3, 1865, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (more commonly known as the Freedmen's Bureau), coordinated the various missionary groups and, with the help of the freed people themselves, established over 3,000 schools in the South.⁴ Originally the Freedmen's Bureau Act did not say anything specific regarding education, but General O.O. Howard, head of the Freedman's Bureau, encouraged and coordinated the work of benevolent groups which provided teachers, school houses, and materials. Howard thought that education would be the key to a free Southern society.

Education was perhaps the greatest contribution of the Freedman's Bureau, since it laid the foundation for the public school system in the South. Upon its creation, the Freedman's Bureau was responsible for protecting the teachers and the schools maintained by the benevolent associations. But the Freedman's Bureau did not act alone. Locally, members of the United States Army patrolled Freedman's Village. Later, members of the United States Colored Troops were charged with guarding it. In addition, the Bureau provided funds for transportation, buildings, and rations for the teachers. With the help of benevolent societies and members of the local black community, the Freedman's Bureau helped education prosper.

In Freedman's Village a large schoolhouse was built. The American Tract Society built the structure in Freedman's Village which doubled both as a church and a school. During the early years of the Civil War, the Tract Society members set up a school in Camp Barker in the District of Columbia. In the summer of 1863 the Society divided its workers. When the contrabands from Camp Barker were transferred to Arlington Heights, the Society re-established the school in Freedman's Village under the direction of Rev. D.B. Nichols. The schoolhouse was described as being 30 x 70 feet in size. The American Tract Society, with some assistance from the federal government and other benevolent groups, ran the school in the village.⁵

The American Tract Society, founded in 1825, concentrated on the field of publication and distribution of religious and reform literature. Two of the main goals of the Society were to educate the freed people and to save their souls. But in order for learning to occur, teachers and supplies and a school were needed.

The American Tract Society staffed the school in Freedman's Village. Initially Mr. H.E. Simmons, assisted by his wife, was selected as the schoolmaster. The school population was comprised mainly of children from the plantations. Miss Emily Howland, another teacher, was later placed in charge of the village school.⁶ Howland, whose family practiced the Quaker faith, came from Cayuga County, New York. She devoted her life to the education of blacks. Writing books and slates were donated by the American Tract Society. The Boston School Board provided some furniture as did the freedmen in the Industrial School in the village where the men learned job skills such as carpentry while making double desks for the school. December 7, 1863, the opening day of the school, found 150 scholars in attendance. Enrollment figures later that year showed an increase to 250.⁷

The school attracted attention and had many visitors. Secretary Seward, his wife, and his daughter Fannie were regular visitors. In addition, Seward brought foreign ministers and other visitors to the nations capital to see Freedman's Village and especially the school. Also, senators and members of the House of Representatives visited the village. The visitors were pleased to see the superior results of educating the freedmen.

To that end, both a primary and a higher school operated in the village for



Emily Howland as a young woman. (Courtesy Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College)



Hon. William H. Seward, Secretary of State. Along with his wife and daughter, Secretary of State Seward was a regular visitor and advocate for the school in Freedman's Village. He brought many visitors to the school to observe the progress of the students. (June 17, 1865 Harper's Weekly)

students from ages four through fourteen as early as 1864. The curriculum included reading, composition, arithmetic and geography. Books such as the *Freedman's Spelling Book*, *Hillard's Reading* series, *Tower's Speller*, *Greenleaf's Primary Arithmetic* and the *Freedman's Third Reader* were used in freedmen's schools throughout the South.⁸ *Lincoln's Primer*, which featured a sketch of the freedmen dancing in honor of liberty, was also popular. More advanced students used *The Freedmen's Book*, by Lydia Maria Child. It included short biographies of famous black leaders to inspire the young scholars.⁹ Depending on the level of the student, he or she might practice spelling, writing, or mental or written arithmetic. Some students included physical and political geography in their list of courses.

In addition to the traditional curriculum, teachers often felt that they must also teach the freedmen values such as thrift, industry, cleanliness, civic responsibility, political awareness and religious topics. One popular series of lectures used for that purpose in teaching adults was *Plain Counsels for Freed-*

men: In Sixteen Brief Lectures, which was published in 1866 by the American Tract Society. Many of the reformers who came south practiced Republican politics and no doubt encouraged their newly literate students to vote with their party. So it appears that in Freedmen's Village, as throughout the South, the residents learned far more than their ABC's.

The typical freedmen's school day opened with prayer, scripture reading, and the singing of patriotic hymns, such as the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "John Brown." The day school usually stayed in session from four to six hours, equally divided between morning and afternoon. Over one hundred adult students of all ages attended classes from six thirty until eight in the evening at the school run in 1869 by the Reverend E. Turney in Arlington.¹⁰ Turney was also responsible for several other District schools. There were about 100 male and female students in attendance in the school taught by Ellen Reeves. In May, 1865, the American Tract Society said that the three teachers in the village had over 240 students. Whether the education took place in the day or night the teachers often needed volunteers to help them teach and tutor the large numbers of eager students.

Many people volunteered to help educate the freedmen. Because there were larger numbers of people who wanted to be educated than could be accommodated in the school, night schools were started. Government workers volunteered their spare time to teach people to read and write. The Association of Volunteer Teachers begged for more help. A night school was started in Freedman's Village. Ellen Reeves, a village teacher, enlisted the help of many volunteers from the black community. Several soldiers who were stationed with the United States Colored Troops volunteered to help the students learn to read. In addition there were literate carpenters who, along with other community members, volunteered in the school. Most volunteers, including many members of the local black community, held down full time jobs, yet managed to fit in the extra time necessary to help others become educated.

What motivated teachers to come south to places like Freedman's Village? Just as among Peace Corps volunteers of today, a variety of motivations led individuals to volunteer. Some, such as Emily Howland, were moved by their religious or abolitionist feelings to convert heathen souls or help to transform Southern society through education. Others, like Miss Sallie L. Daffin, a native Philadelphian, were willing to come south to try and help others of their race. Humanitarian concerns led others to try to uplift the freedmen. Some people also became teachers because it paid from twenty to fifty dollars a month. Others applied to teach in the South because they were in poor health and thought the Southern climate would bring good health. For these and countless other reasons, people, especially many ministers and female

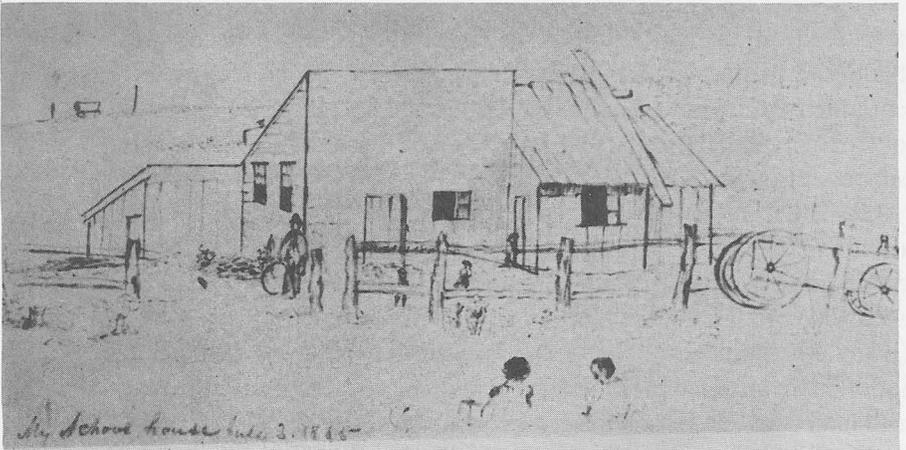
teachers from the North, joined the bandwagon which carried thousands into the South to start schools. They carried a torch which they believed would enlighten the freedmen in both religious and secular instruction. By the end of the Reconstruction years several thousand teachers had taught in freedmen's schools throughout the South.

By 1867, the work of educating the freed people in the District and surrounding areas was progressing well. Although the number of schools had not increased, outside evaluators rated their quality better than in 1863. There were also probably more Northern societies in the Washington D.C. area than in any other area of the South due to the dramatic increase in the black population there after the preliminary emancipation in the District in April of 1862 and later with the Emancipation Proclamation.

Despite the overlapping responsibilities of the many benevolent societies from the North, the teachers usually managed to work together peacefully. Evidence of this cooperative spirit is seen in Freedman's Village, where the National Freedman's Relief Association sent Sojourner Truth to help in working with the American Tract Society to elevate the lives of the freedmen. But despite the cooperation of the various groups involved in this mission, success often depended on the initiative of the individual.

Sojourner Truth, an uneducated former slave and famous orator and fighter for rights, was appointed to counsel the freedmen and to teach them how to keep house. In addition, she taught the freedmen to stand up for their rights. She was a regular visitor in the small whitewashed village homes and could frequently be heard saying, "Be clean! Be clean; for cleanliness is next to Godliness." While living in Freedman's Village she also helped to serve as a model for how to change unfair policies. Although Sojourner Truth served in the village for only a year, she taught the freed people of color much about self-respect.¹¹ The society that she represented, the National Freedmen's Relief Association, was one of many which sent individuals to the D.C. area to improve the lot of the freedmen. And that she did.

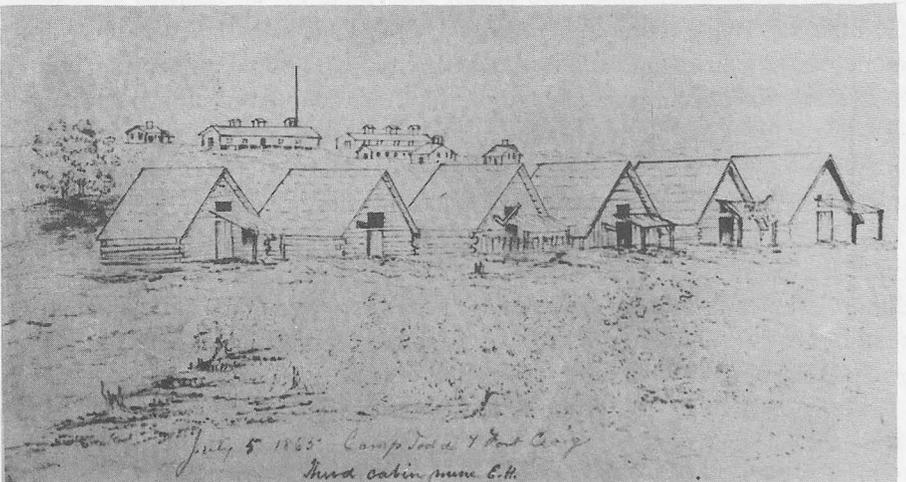
In addition to sponsoring Sojourner Truth, the NFRA and other groups provided teachers, staff, pay, principals, supplies, books, and more. The associations set aside money for purchasing cards for teaching the elements of reading, writing and arithmetic. In addition they appropriated funds for lamps and oil, blackboards and frames, slates, books, and other school house needs.¹² These materials were put to good use, for a group inspecting the village in 1864 found "four hundred children in attendance, their improvement is evident and we take pleasure in pronouncing the school excellent."¹³ It was customary in the area to provide accommodations for schools and to issue rations and fuel to teachers of contrabands. In Freedman's Village the school



Emily Howland taught in this school in Arlington during Reconstruction (Courtesy Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College)

house was erected and was sustained by the private funds of the American Tract Society. In other camps, a vacant building would be redesigned and outfitted to made it usable for school purposes. Again, we see the contributions of many groups and individuals helping in the field of education for the large numbers of children and adults who wanted an education.

After the war, the school population changed dramatically, so that by November, 1866, requests were made to change the Freedman's Village school



Teachers' Quarters, Camp Todd, Virginia 1865 Pencil sketch by Emily Howland (Camp Todd & Fort Craig Third Cabin mine E.H.) (Courtesy Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College)

building to better serve a smaller student population. The population was declining since some of the freedmen resettled in other areas and the government was pressuring the villagers to leave. Well over half of the scholars that remained were from the old Custis slave families, who seemed to be permanent residents as they owned their own homes and cultivated the land. The teacher considered the remaining students promising. Permission was granted to carry out some modifications to the building as long as the work was done cheaply.¹⁴ Some of the work in and around the Village was done by the carpenters in the Industrial School.

The Industrial School provided job skills to selected young people and adults from the village. Miss Heacock was at one time the head of the Industrial School. Elinor Syphax Reeves also directed the sewing classes in the school, where the women learned both hand and machine sewing. They also were taught how to make clothing. In fact, in one month, May, 1868, the female students of the Industrial School produced over twelve hundred items, including hats, straw braided patchwork and other articles of clothing. Some of the clothing made by the villagers was used to help clothe the aged freed people in the area.

The Industrial School workshops were only open to the most intelligent boys. In the workshops they acquired the skills of carpenters, tailors, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, shoemakers, harness-makers, or other mechanical occupations.¹⁵ Thus, the Industrial School in Freedman's Village trained adults in new skills. The plan was to train the freedmen to be self-supporting so that they could leave the village and support their families. However, sometimes even after training the citizens were not allowed to practice in their chosen field.

After training and some rudimentary education, an effort was made to place the freedmen in jobs in other areas. Sojourner Truth encouraged and convinced many of the freedmen that she met to relocate to the Midwest. However, many were hired locally by the federal government, particularly during the war. Some got jobs nearby working in the brickyards or as teamsters. Others worked with the horses in the government corrals or depots in the area. Those who had job offers got transportation away from the nation's capital to begin anew in New England, the Midwest and other areas. Others stayed on and farmed on the government farms nearby. Whether they stayed in the area or left it, the results of education were evident.

Throughout the freedmen's villages in the South, children would study their alphabets alongside older people who were reading religious books for the first time. It was common to hear Lincoln praised as a friend to the freedmen. The schools in the villages were crowded when they first opened, had dramatic fluctuations in attendance, particularly during the early years, and served

much smaller populations near the closing of the village. Everyone was not, however, pleased with the idea of education for the freedmen.

From the Southern point of view, the "Yankee schoolmarms" were doing little good for the freedmen. One Virginia newspaper published this comment on the teachers:

White cravated gentlemen from Andover, with a nasal twang, and pretty Yankee girls, with the smallest of feet, have flocked to the South as missionary ground, and are besides instructing them in chemistry, botany and natural philosophy, teaching them to speak French, sing Italian, and walk Spanish, so that in time we are bound to have intelligent and probably intellectual labor.¹⁶

To these Southerners education for the freedmen was too specialized and would raise them out of their position in society. Many people felt that there was no need to teach a laboring class and if the freedmen were to be educated, it should be done by Southerners.

The land where Freedman's Village was located became a Military Reservation after the federal government settled with the descendants of the Custis-Lee family. Because the land was part of a military installation, the county of Alexandria refused to admit the children to its public schools. The villagers, who wanted an education for their children, asked that the Quartermaster's Office make repairs, pay a teacher, and furnish fuel and furniture for a school. The request was denied. Later, on October 18, 1890, the Quartermaster General recommended that "those residents of Freedman's Village who still remained be forced to move."¹⁷ The remaining residents moved to several other communities in Arlington, including Arlington View and Queen City. Descendants of the villagers live and go to school in Arlington today.

During the Civil War and Reconstruction, Southern society was on the brink of a dramatic transformation. Slave liberation, fighting for freedom by black and white troops, and dramatic changes to our Constitution in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments set the stage for major alterations. Unfortunately, in all but one field, that of education, the changes made were short lived due to a system of social, political and economic entrapment which forced the freedmen into sharecropping and a life offering little more than slavery. Education did not open all the areas of equality to the contrabands. Yet, due to the coordinated efforts of the federal government, charitable societies and the freedmen themselves, a lasting contribution to racial progress through education was achieved. The percentage of blacks who were illiterate decreased dramatically with each passing decade, according to *Social Statistics*, Series H graph, in 1870 79.9 percent of the black population was illit-

erate. By 1880 the figure was reduced to 70%, and by the turn of the century it was down to 44.5%.¹⁸ Once freed people of color became educated, it was one skill they would share with the next generation and with others in the community, and carry with them proudly to their graves.

It took until the middle part of the twentieth century with *Brown v. the Board of Education* and other Civil Rights protests and legal reforms for equal education to begin to become fully institutionalized. Although society fell far short of its goal for social, political, civil and economic equality, due to the cooperative effort of many groups and individuals, education: the genie let out of Aladdin's lamp, would never again be totally extinguished. We can look back to education in Freedman's Village and other freedmen's schools throughout the South as an important first step towards equal public education for all citizens.

Notes and References

Bobbi Schildt teaches U.S. History and Reading/Writing at H.B. Woodlawn School in Arlington. In 1992-93 she was selected to be a teacher/scholar by the National Endowment for the Humanities. She gives thanks to Dr. Ira Berlin, her mentor during her year of study at NEH, to Leslie Rowland and the entire staff at the Freedom and Southern Society Project for their help in using their collection, and to the NEH for their support during the year. She found especially useful the records relating to Freedman's Village located in the ample collections of the Freedom and Southern Society Project housed in the History Department at the College Park campus of the University of Maryland. Brackets with the letter and number indicate the coding system for the papers in this library.

¹From frontispiece, Lydia Maria Child, *The Freedmen's Book*, (Boston: Tichnor and Fields, 1865).

²For purposes of this paper Reconstruction began on April 16, 1862 with the passage of the bill for emancipation in the District of Columbia.

³The term "contraband" refers to the escaped slaves who were confiscated by the Union Army as contraband of war. General Benjamin Butler is cited as first accepting freedmen into the Union lines, at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, as laborers who could be used to the advantage of the Union cause.

⁴Henry Lee Swint, *Dear Ones at Home: Letters from Contraband Camps* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1966), p. 2.

⁵Captain J.M. Brown (AQM) to Capt. Geo. B. Carse, 11 February 1865, Press Copies of Letters Sent, Vol. 60, p. 55, Assistant Quartermasters Office, RG 105 [A-10611].

⁶Capt. J.M. Brown to Capt. Geo. B. Carse, Supt. Freedman's Village, 14 July 1865, Press Copies of Letters Sent, Ser. 527, Records of the Assistant Quartermaster, RG 105 [A-10618].

⁷Felix James, "Freedman's Village, Arlington, Virginia: A History Master's Dissertation," Department of History, Howard University, Washington, 1967.

⁸Henry L. Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South 1862-1870* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1941).

⁹Child, *The Freedmen's Book*.

- ¹⁰Edwin M. Stanton to Maj. Gen. Heintzelman, W 43, Letters Received, Ser. 5382, Dept. of Washington, RG 393 [4557].
- ¹¹Jacqueline Bernard, *Journey Toward Freedom: The Story of Sojourner Truth* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990).
- ¹²"Second Annual Report of the National Freedman's Relief Association of the District of Columbia," (Washington: M'gill and Witherow Printers, 1864), p. 6.
- ¹³Gen. Meigs to Edwin Stanton, 15 August 1864, Press Copies of Reports, Ser. 16. Quartermaster General Reports, RG 92 [Y-702].
- ¹⁴Capt. J.M. Brown to Maj. Gen. M.C. Meigs, 10 December 1864, Vol. 60, Press Copies of Letters Sent, Ser. 527, Records of the Assistant Quartermaster, RG 105 [A-10609].
- ¹⁵Margaret Leech, *Reveille In Washington 1860-1865* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1941), pp. 251-252.
- ¹⁶"Economic Development of the Negro in Virginia," Richmond Times, Publications of the University of Virginia, Phelps-Stokes Fellowship Papers, No. 9, LP43.
- ¹⁷"The Eviction of the Squatters from Freedman's Village," Washington Post, Washington D.C., December 7, 1887.
- ¹⁸*Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1975), Chart Series H, p. 382.