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## **Black Children and Northern Missionaries, Freedmen's Bureau Agents, and Southern Whites in Reconstruction Tennessee, 1865-1869**

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Troy Lee Kickler entitled "Black Children and Northern Missionaries, Freedmen's Bureau Agents, and Southern Whites in Reconstruction Tennessee, 1865 -1869." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in History.

Stephen V. Ash, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Paul Bergeron, George White, Asafa Jalata

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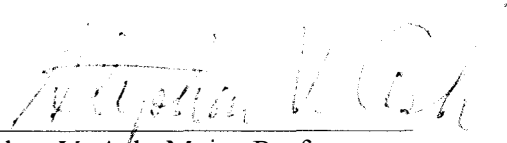
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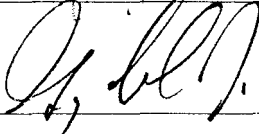
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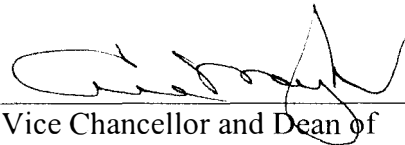


Stephen V. Ash, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and  
recommend its acceptance:



Acceptance for the Council:



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**BLACK CHILDREN AND NORTHERN MISSIONARIES, FREEDMEN'S  
BUREAU AGENTS, AND SOUTHERN WHITES IN RECONSTRUCTION  
TENNESSEE, 1865-1869**

A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Troy Lee Kickler  
December 2005

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Stephen V. Ash, my advisor, for his commitment to hone his students into better writers and historians. I would also like to thank the rest of my committee--Drs. Paul H. Bergeron, George White, and Asafa Jalata—for their willingness to help supervise the writing of this dissertation. I must also express my gratitude to the Southern Baptist Library and Archive in Nashville, Tennessee, and the History Department of the University of Tennessee--Knoxville for helping fund this work. I am also thankful for the support of all my family and friends, yet the encouragement of my parents, Everett Kickler, Jr. and Faye Kickler, and my wife, Deborah Kickler, helped me immeasurably to finish this dissertation.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores one of the forgotten characters of Reconstruction and African American history: the black child. It begins with the experiences of young black Tennesseans during slavery and the Civil War, then examines their lives after freedom within and outside the family and in schools, and ends with an account of their memory of Reconstruction.

During Reconstruction, black children's lives were affected daily by the ideological conflict among freedmen, white Southerners, Bureau agents, and Northern missionaries. By and large slave children had experienced a childhood—thanks to the efforts of slave parents in sustaining family bonds. Yet after the tumultuous change and violence of civil war they wondered what the future held for them. Although black parents struggled mightily after freedom to form secure and protective environments, many children could not live in the ideal nuclear family imagined by freedmen, agents, and missionaries, for defiant ex-Confederates and Conservatives, and even Bureau policies and bureaucratic red tape, prevented many from enjoying the benefits of a truly independent family. Apprenticeships with whites sometimes provided the best living conditions for orphans and for children of single mothers, who struggled to make ends meet. Many apprentices' lives were little different than in slavery, but now they relied on the federal government to intervene on their behalf and learned values and trades in preparation for an independent adulthood. Sabbath schools, Bureau and missionary day schools, and the public schools provided the best preparation, however. Educators taught



not only the three R's but the religious and Victorian values and civic duties they believed would make black children free.

Reconstruction was in many ways a continuation of the Civil War; black children were in the middle of this postwar ideological conflict, for what beliefs and practices the children adopted would determine, in part, the success or failure of Reconstruction. This first free generation of African Americans is thus an integral part not only of the Reconstruction story but also of the American experience.

## PREFACE

While much has been written about the American Civil War, comparatively little has been written about the war's immediate aftermath: Reconstruction. In the last two decades, the number of Reconstruction studies has increased, but few deal with the complicated history of Tennessee from 1865 to 1870. And hardly anything has been written about children during that time.<sup>1</sup>

This dissertation explores one of the forgotten characters of Reconstruction and African American history: the black child. Some histories have included accounts of young freedmen when examining the black family, labor relations, or schools during Reconstruction, but none presents a comprehensive story. This study begins with the experiences of black children of Tennessee during slavery and the Civil War, then delves

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<sup>1</sup> On wartime Tennessee, see Stephen V. Ash, Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870: War and Peace in the Upper South (Baton Rouge, 1988); Noel C. Fisher, War at Every Door: Partisan Politics and Guerilla Violence in East Tennessee, 1860-1869 (Chapel Hill, 1997); Robert Tracy McKenzie, One South or Many?: Plantation Belt and Upcountry in Civil War-Era Tennessee (Cambridge, 1994); and John Cimprich, Slavery's End in Tennessee (Tuscaloosa, 1986). For a good overview of Civil War-era Tennessee, see Paul H. Bergeron, Stephen V. Ash, and Jeanette Keith, Tennesseans and Their History (Knoxville, 1999).

into their lives within and outside the family during Reconstruction, and ends with a brief examination of their memory of Reconstruction.<sup>2</sup>

It is more than the retelling of black children's experiences, however. It is intended to fill a gap in our understanding of Reconstruction Tennessee and national Reconstruction. In doing so, it enlarges our knowledge of race relations, the roles of Northern missionaries and Freedmen's Bureau agents, the slaves' transition to freedom, and economic and labor conditions in the post-Civil War South.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> No in-depth study of black children during Reconstruction has ever been published.

Some general accounts of American childhood, however, touch on the subject. See Steven Mintz, Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood (Cambridge, 2004); and Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner, eds., American Childhood: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook (Westport, 1985). More research has been done on slave childhood. Significant studies include Marie Jenkins Schwartz, Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South (Cambridge, 2000); and Wilma King, Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America (Bloomington, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Although many works examine the operations of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, only one, Paul D. Phillips, "A History of the Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1964), is an in-depth study of the agency in the Volunteer State. A much shorter account is Weymouth T. Jordan, "The Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee," East Tennessee Historical Society Publications 11 (1939): 47-61. Older yet useful histories of the Bureau include Paul S. Pierce, The

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Freedmen's Bureau: A Chapter in the History of Reconstruction (Iowa City, 1904); and George R. Bentley, A History of the Freedmen's Bureau (Philadelphia, 1955). An updated interpretation of the national Bureau by Paul Cimbala has been recently published: The Freedmen's Bureau: Reconstructing the American South after the Civil War (Malabar, 2005). With Randall Miller, Cimbala has also co-edited an anthology that illustrates the new direction of Bureau studies: Paul A. Cimbala and Randall Miller, eds., The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations (New York, 1999); Tennessee is the only state of the former Confederacy not listed in its index. There are, however, several studies of state branches, including Martin Abbott, The Freedmen's Bureau in South Carolina, 1865-1872 (Chapel Hill, 1967); Howard A. White, The Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana (Baton Rouge, 1970); Barry A. Crouch, The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Texans (Austin, 1992); Randy Finley, From Slavery to Uncertain Freedom: The Freedmen's Bureau in Arkansas, 1865-1869 (Fayetteville, 1996); and Paul A. Cimbala, Under the Guardianship of the Nation: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Reconstruction of Georgia, 1865-1870 (Athens, 1997). See also Claude F. Oubre, Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Legal Rights of Blacks, 1865-1868 (Millwood, 1979), and Donald G. Nieman, ed., The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Freedom, Vol. II of Donald G. Nieman, ed., African American Life in Post-Emancipation South, 1861-1900: A Twelve-Volume Anthology of Scholarly Articles (New York, 1994).

Some essays examine the Bureau's dealings with educational and family matters, including Barry A. Crouch and Larry Madaris, "Reconstructing Black Families:

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Perspectives from the Texas Freedmen's Bureau Records," Prologue 18 (1986): 109-22; Luther P. Jackson, "The Educational Efforts of the Freedmen's Bureau and Aid Societies of South Carolina, 1862-1872," Journal of Negro History 8 (1923): 1-40; W. A. Low, "The Freedmen's Bureau and Education in Maryland," Maryland Historical Magazine 47 (1952): 29-39; Mary J. Farmer, "'Because They Are Women': Gender and the Virginia Freedmen's Bureau's 'War on Dependency,'" in Cimbala and Miller, eds., Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction, 161-92; and Rebecca Scott, "The Battle Over the Child: Child Apprenticeship and the Freedmen's Bureau in North Carolina," Prologue 10 (1978): 101-13.

Any account of Northern missionaries will invariably discuss the education of freedmen. The most informative works about missionaries and the values they trumpeted are Jacqueline Jones, Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks (Chapel Hill, 1980); Joe M. Richardson, Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890 (Athens, 1986); Ronald Butchart, Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875 (Westport, 1980); Henry L. Swint, The Northern Teacher in the South, 1862-1870 (Nashville, 1941); and Robert C. Morris, Reading, 'Riting, and Reconstruction: The Education of Freedmen in the South, 1861-1870 (Chicago, 1981). Although underestimating the contributions of the Bureau, James D. Anderson, The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935 (Chapel Hill, 1988) nevertheless offers a good account of blacks' own educational efforts. A general survey of black education in Reconstruction Tennessee can be found in Paul David Phillips, "Education of Blacks in

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Tennessee during Reconstruction, 1865-1870,” in Carroll Van West, ed., Trials and Triumph: Essays in Tennessee’s African American History (Knoxville, 2002).

The most familiar work on the black family is Herbert G. Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925 (New York, 1977). On black families during Reconstruction specifically, see Noralee Frankel, Freedom’s Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi (Bloomington, 1999); Peter Bardaglio, Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South (Chapel Hill, 1995); Elizabeth Regosin, Freedom’s Promise: Ex-Slave Families and Citizenship in the Age of Emancipation (Charlottesville, 2002); Leslie Schwalm, A Hard Fight for We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina (Urbana, 1997); and Michelle A. Krowl, “For Better or Worse: Black Families and ‘the State’ in Civil War Virginia” in Catherine Clinton, ed., Southern Families at War: Loyalty and Conflict in the Civil War South (Oxford, 2000), 35-57. See also Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland, Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of African-American Kinship in the Civil War Era (New York, 1997) and Dylan Penningroth, The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South (Chapel Hill, 2003).

Many studies have examined Reconstruction politics and race relations in Tennessee and the South as a whole. Although over a half-century old, Thomas B. Alexander, Political Reconstruction in Tennessee, 1865-1872 (Nashville, 1950) and James Welch Patton, Unionism and Reconstruction in Tennessee (Chapel Hill, 1934) remain authoritative works. Another old work, E. Merton Coulter’s William G.

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Brownlow: Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands (Chapel Hill, 1937; reprint, Knoxville, 1999) is an entertaining and informative account of one of the most colorful characters of the era. On the political ideas of black Tennesseans, see Alruthus Ambush Taylor, The Negro in Tennessee, 1865-1870 (Washington, D. C., 1941), which also provides leads for anyone researching any aspect of freedmen's lives during that time. For more on black political involvement in the Reconstruction South, see Howard N. Rabinowitz, Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890 (New York, 1978); Thomas Holt, Black over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction (Urbana, 1982); and Leon F. Litwack, Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery (New York, 1979). Useful overviews of the political and social landscape of Reconstruction Tennessee are in Paul H. Bergeron, Paths of the Past: Tennessee, 1770-1970 (Knoxville, 1979), Bergeron, et al., Tennesseans and Their History, and Lester Lamon, Blacks in Tennessee, 1791-1970 (Knoxville, 1981). For accounts of Conservative violence in Reconstruction, see Allen W. Trelease, The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction (New York, 1971); and George C. Rable, But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction (Athens, 1984). For the beliefs of Tennessee Conservatives, see Fred Arthur Bailey, Class and Tennessee's Generation (Chapel Hill, 1987); and Paul D. Phillips, "White Reaction to the Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee During Reconstruction, 1865-1870," Tennessee Historical Quarterly 46 (1987): 98-109. Taylor's Negro in Tennessee and Alexander's Political Reconstruction also touch on Conservative ideology.

Perhaps this topic has been neglected because it has some inherent difficulties. For one thing, the freed people, and especially children, did not leave many written records. Much of this study, therefore, is based on what Bureau agents, Northern missionaries, and white Tennesseans said about young freedmen. And even those sources in many cases provide only fragmentary evidence. For another thing, Tennessee's enormous geographical diversity makes writing a narrative of all black children there an even more complex task.



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## LIST OF SYMBOLS

AMATN	American Missionary Association Manuscripts, Tennessee
OR	Official Records
RACTN	Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Tennessee Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands
SRTN	Selected Records of the Tennessee Field Office of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands
TCSPA	Tennessee Colored Soldier's Pension Applications

# CHAPTER I

## AN UNCERTAIN EMANCIPATION: BLACK CHILDREN AND THE TRANSITION TO FREEDOM IN TENNESSEE

After the importation of slaves was outlawed in 1808, the number of slaves in the United States grew rapidly, almost exclusively through natural reproduction. Many of the antebellum “baby-boom generation” of slaves lived through the tumultuous years of the 1850s and the Civil War, and unlike those before them they would see their dream of freedom come true. While much has been written about antebellum slavery and the wartime transition to freedom, little has been written about slave children’s experience during that time. But without some understanding of that experience, our knowledge of the slave family, slave labor, the slave community, and the process of emancipation is incomplete.

Before there was a Tennessee, slavery existed in the land that would become the state. Slaves first came to the region during the mid-1700s. Working as fur trappers with their white masters, they roamed the region, or they settled the land, working as farm hands for white settlers in present-day East Tennessee. Slavery was of only minor economic importance until after 1790, however, when Tennessee attained territorial status. When Tennessee achieved statehood in 1796, its constitution said nothing about slavery, yet slavery existed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Michael McCormack, Slavery on the Tennessee Frontier (Nashville, 1977), 2-3; Paul H. Bergeron, Stephen V. Ash, and Jeanette Keith, Tennesseans and Their History

The institution was well established in Middle Tennessee by the 1780s and in West Tennessee by the 1820s. It expanded rapidly in both regions as cotton and tobacco agriculture became profitable. The number of slaves in Tennessee increased dramatically as the demand for their labor increased: from 3,417 in 1790, to about 82,000 in 1820, to approximately 280,000 by 1860 (one-fourth of the state's population). This seventy-year expansion contributed to the demographic and agricultural diversity of the state. In East Tennessee, where in 1860 11 percent of the population was black, there were mostly small farms; Middle Tennessee, whose population was 29 percent black, had larger farms that produced cotton and tobacco; in West Tennessee, where one-third (34 percent) of the population was black, cotton plantations were a familiar sight. West Tennessee's Haywood and Fayette counties, in particular, were true plantation counties, similar to many in the Deep South.<sup>2</sup>

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(Knoxville, 1999); Caleb Perry Patterson, The Negro in Tennessee, 1790-1865 (New York, 1922; reprint, 1968), 9-10, 168.

<sup>2</sup> Patterson, Negro in Tennessee, 59-62, 212; Chase Mooney, Slavery in Tennessee (Bloomington, 1957), 101-102, 115, 116-49; John Cimprich, Slavery's End in Tennessee, 1861-1865 (University, 1985), 8-9; United States Department of the Interior, Census Office, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Population, vol. 1 of 4 (Washington, 1864).

Slavery in Tennessee, as a social and economic institution, was distinctive. There was no planter hegemony of the sort that prevailed in the Lower South. Only 111 planters in 1860 had more than one hundred slaves (and only one of those lived in East Tennessee); 77 percent of owners had fewer than ten slaves. Of the approximately 280,000 slaves living in Tennessee by 1860, most lived with only one to ten other slaves, working small tracts of land and performing a variety of tasks. Not all slaves worked on farms or plantations, however; many lived in towns or worked in manufacturing establishments.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, not every black in Tennessee was a slave. By 1860 approximately 7,300 free blacks lived an anomalous life, somewhere between slavery and freedom. The few rights enjoyed by this small portion of the population, including property ownership, freedom of mobility, and even male suffrage until 1834, were taken away or threatened as whites worked to entrench the institution of slavery. The existence of free blacks bothered many white Tennesseans, for it contradicted the notion that servitude was the destined condition of blacks. After 1831 the Tennessee legislature encouraged free blacks to leave the state, although an 1852 law allowed manumitted slaves to stay if they had court-appointed trustees. Tennessee also enacted legislation in 1854 requiring free

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<sup>3</sup> Patterson, Negro in Tennessee, 62; Mooney, Slavery, 51-52, 86, 100, 116, 124. For an argument that capitalist mind-set prevailed among small slaveholders, see James Oakes, The Ruling Class: A History of American Slaveholders (New York, 1982; reprint, 1998).

blacks to be sent to Africa. Although few if any emigrated, one thing was certain: by 1860 whites had effectively “closed the gates of society” to free blacks.<sup>4</sup>

Slaves’ legal status likewise changed substantially after 1831, when the Nat Turner slave rebellion in Virginia sent shock waves across the South. Before that time, the frontier nature of the state made for more liberal slave codes: slaves hunted with guns, had considerable freedom of mobility, and could negotiate the terms of their hiring-out with their master. After 1831, as the state developed and white fear of slave revolts grew, slaves were more restricted in their activities and faced harsher punishments.<sup>5</sup>

A tumultuous decade for the entire nation, the 1850s was a time when the restriction of free and unfree blacks’ liberties helped entrench the institution of slavery in Tennessee. A primary indicator of this was the revival of the interstate slave trade. Although some whites transported slaves across state lines, the interstate slave trade was

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen V. Ash, Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870: War and Peace in the Upper South (Baton Rouge, 1988), 61-62; Patterson, Negro in Tennessee, 159; Mooney, Slavery, 77-78; Bergeron, Tennesseans, 124; Durwood Dunn, An Abolitionist in the Appalachian South: Ezekiel Birdseye on Slavery, Capitalism, and Separate Statehood in East Tennessee, 1841-1846 (Knoxville, 71-77).

<sup>5</sup> Mooney, Slavery, 19-21, 28; Patterson, Negro in Tennessee, 12-36, 49-50; Kenneth Stampp, The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South (New York, 1956), 137-38.

illegal in Tennessee from 1835 to 1855; but when lawmakers re-legalized the trade in 1855, Memphis and Nashville quickly became nexuses of the trade. Now more than ever, the stability of black families was in jeopardy. The revived trade helped drive the average price of a slave from an average of \$506 in 1850 to \$854 in 1860. The price of older children was often higher: at a sale in Lebanon adolescent boys averaged \$1,406. In 1856 the state strengthened patrol laws, creating a quasi police force, mostly consisting of poorer whites, whose purpose was to capture absconding slaves and apprehend those traveling without a pass. In 1856, when a slave uprising scare in Middle Tennessee drove whites to the point of paranoia, the state decreed that black conspirators receive the death penalty. By the time of the Civil War, the slave laws of Tennessee were detailed and harsh, imposing severe punishments such as twenty lashes for carrying a gun without a written pass and thirty-nine lashes for telling lies.<sup>6</sup>

No matter the time or location in Tennessee, whether in 1790 or 1859, in Newport or in Memphis, a slave was considered under state law to be both chattel and human. A slave could not own property, for he was property; he could not make contracts; he had no political rights, no marital rights, and no legal control over his children. White Southerners, however, acknowledged that blacks deserved certain basic protections, thus

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<sup>6</sup> Mooney, Slavery, 17-21, 27-29, 37, 39, 63; Patterson, Negro in Tennessee, 25-58; The War of Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies 128 vols. (Washington, 1880-1901), Series Three, 4 (1): 332-35, hereinafter cited as O. R.

creating a paradox. For instance, slaves could have a quasi-marital relationship, giving legitimacy to their children; could be prosecuted as a criminal; and, eventually, had a right to trial by jury. Needless to say, these “rights” fell short of being inalienable, but they were admissions of humanity and even legal personhood. As one Tennessee judge recalled in 1868, “Slaves, although regarded as property and subject to many restriction[s], never were considered by the courts of this state as standing on the same footing as horses, cattle, and other personal property.” The makers and interpreters of law, in fact, recognized the divine origin of blacks and whites: “A Slave is not in the condition of a horse or ox,” stated Justice Nathan Green in 1846. “He is made after the image of the Creator.”<sup>7</sup>

For some time the moral question of bondage had bothered white Tennesseans. Until the late antebellum era they were not unified on the slavery issue. During the 1820s and 1830s, Tennessee ranked second in the nation in abolitionist activity, next to North Carolina. Ezekiel Birdseye of Newport, for instance, condemned the violence endemic to slavery, although he thought the institution in Tennessee more benign than in other states. The influence of Birdseye and others—such as Presbyterian minister John Rankin, founder of Washington and Tusculum colleges, and Benjamin Lundy, founder of the newspaper The Genius of Universal Emancipation—made East Tennessee a center of abolitionist activity in those years: the region contained one-fifth of the nation’s anti-

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<sup>7</sup> Patterson, Negro in Tennessee, 56-57; Mooney, Slavery, 7-28; Stamp, Peculiar Institution, 192-93.



slavery societies and one-sixth of the membership. In 1834, with pro-slavery sentiment growing, the anti-slavery vanguard made an impressive effort to abolish slavery by petitioning the constitutional convention, but their proposed amendment never passed. This defeat, along with the tightening of the slave code and the swelling of pro-slavery sentiment in Tennessee's churches, indicated that the state was on an irreversible course to secure the existence of the "peculiar institution" and crystallize racism.<sup>8</sup>

According to some older histories of Tennessee slavery, there should not have been much for abolitionists to complain about. Chase Mooney and Caleb Perry Patterson insisted that slave life was generally tolerable for blacks in Tennessee: slaves lived primarily on small farms, thus developing close relationships with masters; some slaves were taught to read and write (Tennessee never had a law outlawing the education of slaves); and there were few "cruel masters" because the state bound owners to take proper care of their slaves. These authors also assert that masters routinely manumitted slaves, even when such practice was outlawed, and gave lighter punishments than required by law.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Patterson, Negro in Tennessee, 125, 176-94, 197-98, 200-201; Dunn, Abolitionist in the Appalachian South, 3-25.

<sup>9</sup> Dunn, Abolitionist in the Appalachian South, 67-86; Patterson, Negro in Tennessee, 62; Mooney, Slavery, 51-52, 86, 100, 116, 124.

Patterson and Mooney painted too rosy a picture of slavery, yet white paternalism was indeed much in evidence in antebellum Tennessee. A willingness to keep the black family intact was a characteristic of white paternalism, and slave family separation occurred less often in Tennessee than in other slave states. Many scholars, including Kenneth Stampp and John Blassingame, point out that Southern slaveholders fancied themselves benevolent parents, but the frequency of family separation gave the lie to their claims. Other scholars, such as Ira Berlin and Leslie Rowland, assert that blacks subtly persuaded otherwise greedy masters to be paternalistic and maintain black family ties. And Barbara Jeanne Fields asserts that slave families in Maryland were separated frequently because the state had few planters and thereby lacked a great number of paternalists, who despite their racist presuppositions at least attempted to maintain slave family stability. Neither of these arguments is altogether true for Tennessee, for in a state with few planters, the majority of slaveowners avoided separating the black family. Large slave owners, such as Dr. James Hoggatt of Davidson County, also evinced a paternalistic nature; they “rarely speculated or dealt in slaves as a matter of profit,” claimed John McCline, a slave of Hoggatt. In a survey of 1,292 slave couples in Shelby, Dyer, and Gibson counties, all located in the heavily slave-populated western region, historian John Cimprich found that 298 (23 percent) were separated by sale. A study of marriage certificates of former slaves in Tennessee, Louisiana, and Mississippi, reveals that families in Tennessee had the best chance of family stability, with 27 percent separated by sale (302 out of 1,123 couples). These statistics indicate that most blacks

(approximately three out of four) lived in stable families, yet the numbers are still appalling and indicate that separation by sale was not uncommon.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stampp, Peculiar Institution, 162-63, 228-31, 322-30; John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York, 1972), 78-79, 86-90, 96-97; Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of Kinship in the Civil War Era (Cambridge, 1997); Barbara Jeanne Fields, Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century (New Haven, 1985); John Cimprich, Slavery's End, 10-11, 16; Eugene D. Genovese, A Consuming Fire: The Fall of the Confederacy in the Mind of the Christian South (Athens, 1998), 4-12; Jan Furman, ed., Slavery in the Clover Bottoms: John McCline's Narrative of His Life During Slavery and the Civil War (Knoxville, 1998), 20. See also Brenda E. Stevenson, Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South (New York, 1996), Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York, 1974), and William Dusinger, Slave Master President: The Double Career of James Polk (Oxford, 2003), 23-32. In Concordia Parish, Louisiana, Freedmen's Bureau agents found that 158 out of 540 couples (35 percent) were separated by sale, and in Adams County, Mississippi, 477 out of 1,225 couples (40 percent) were separated by sale. For another explanation of these statistics and further sources concerning slave families, see Blassingame, Slave Community, 90-94.

Even if they were willing to separate slave children from their fathers, however, many white Tennesseans had qualms about separating them from their mothers. Slave children, under Tennessee law, belonged to the owner of the mother and many owners refused to separate mother and child. Thus, some slave children never worried about being sold from their mother; James Hoggatt never separated children and mothers, claimed former slave John McCline.<sup>11</sup>

Essentially nothing but his good will kept a Tennessee master from selling fathers or mothers from children. Some children were separated not only from their fathers but also from their mothers and siblings. William Gant relished the moments he had with his parents during his entire childhood; however, he regretted not growing up with his brothers and sisters, all of whom were “divided out.” At least he knew his parents and siblings; some slaves, torn from their families during infancy, never did. Martha Cunningham remembered that mothers were “sold from [their] babies, and babies sold from their mothers.” Others had the memory of being separated from their family in a piece-meal fashion that either made the emotional pain incremental and bearable or a never-ending torture. For example, Annie Griegg and her sister were sold from their mother for \$100 each. Later, Annie was separated from her sister.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Stampp, Peculiar Institution, 246-47; Furman, Slavery in the Clover Bottoms, 16; Patterson, Negro in Tennessee, 53-55; Fayetteville Observer, 19 Mar. 1863.

<sup>12</sup> George Rawick, The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, 40 volumes to date (Westport, 1972- ), 9A:11-13, 7A:45-47, 4A:113-17.

Even families not separated by sale sometimes lived apart. The process of hiring-out took parents away from their children, or vice versa, for days, weeks, or even months. An idle slave was a liability to the master, so often after harvest time he would hire out his slaves to artisans or manufacturers, enabling him to make money off their labor year-round. Many children thus lived in what they considered separated families, because their parents resided in different households; their father seemed more like a visitor than a parent.<sup>13</sup>

Many masters not only separated slave families but also ignored slave protection laws. Only three cases of master abuse were adjudicated in the history of Tennessee, certainly not because masters were rarely cruel, but because only thrice was someone bold enough to press charges. As historian Durwood Dunn reminds us, if what Ezekiel Birdseye saw was prevalent—the burning of a slave in Cocke County—Tennessee was a more violent place for slaves than some have believed.<sup>14</sup>

Many children undoubtedly were too naïve to understand the full implications of such barbarism. At some point in their young life, children commonly saw an overseer or master whipping another black, the most common punishment during slavery. Others

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 8A:324-28.

<sup>14</sup> Patterson, Negro in Tennessee, 36-38; Dunn, Abolitionist in the Appalachian South, 76-85.

saw more grisly scenes: slaves clubbed senseless or tied over a barrel and lashed until their backs were a bloody mess. Some even saw their parents beaten. But many parents, according to J. W. Loguen, an escaped slave from Tennessee, kept children ignorant of such violence. Even when children saw a bloody and bruised slave, they knew not what to think. They were only told that one day they would know.<sup>15</sup>

Such gruesome experiences have led some historians to conclude that slave children had no childhood, that it was stolen by whites. But such incidents were not everyday occurrences. And recent scholarship overlooks the naivete of children and the ability of the black family to help provide a childhood. Furthermore, only by today's standards of child-rearing do slave children seem to have a stolen childhood. Children today are expected to attend school, not work full-time. And today's children have a period of adolescence—a transition from childhood to adulthood that includes recreation, experimentation, and chances to make mistakes. Also children are expected to receive a certain level of nutrition today that was almost impossible for any social class in yesteryear.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jermain Wesley Loguen, The Rev. J. W. Loguen, As a Slave and As a Freeman. A Narrative of Real Life (Syracuse, 1859), 19, 29, 31-32, 35, 40. For an electronic version of this book, see [www.docsouth.unc.edu/neh/loguen.html](http://www.docsouth.unc.edu/neh/loguen.html).

<sup>16</sup> Wilma King, Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in the Nineteenth-Century America (Bloomington, 1995).

Long after slavery, many freedmen retained fond memories of their younger years. As Frederick Douglass, a former Maryland slave, recalled, “The first seven to eight years of a slave boy’s life are about as full of sweet content as those most favored and petted white children. . . . Freed from all restraint, the slave boy can be, in his life and conduct, a genuine boy, doing whatever his boyish nature suggests.” Children in Tennessee had similar experiences. In Davidson County, James Loguen’s “first ten years” were a time of freedom; he was well fed and “suffered no treatment that hinted” he was a slave. Although generally less idyllic, slave children’s lives were markedly different from that of older slaves, their work-load lighter, their punishment less harsh. Many slaves furthermore became aware of their caste and their bondage only when they emerged from childhood. Loguen noted that in their first decade slave children were unaware of many things and unable to freely understand their situation even if they tried. Such children had, as one historian puts it, a “blurred vision of bondage.”<sup>17</sup>

In late antebellum Tennessee, many black two-parent homes functioned like a nuclear family. This structure was only possible, of course, for slaves whose masters did not divide their families. Liza Jones of Jackson lived in such a family, luckily avoiding the painful separation that many of her peers endured. Examples like Liza’s were not uncommon. William Gant of Bedford County, for instance, enjoyed the company of his parents throughout his childhood. So did William Davis, who bragged that his immediate family, living near Kingston, was larger than his master’s. He was also proud, no doubt,

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<sup>17</sup> Blassingame, *Slave Community*, 95-96; Loguen, *Rev. J. W. Loguen*, 29.

because his family carved out a niche of liberty in an unfree world. Because his parents were given much control over everyday family affairs, William and his four brothers and three sisters lived more like free people.<sup>18</sup>

Many two-parent families, however, operated sometimes like a one-parent family because the father belonged to a different master and could visit his family only occasionally. Nevertheless, many parents separated in this way maintained a stable family life and considered themselves a couple. When allowed, Drucilla Marten's father, of Giles County, made one-day visits every week or two. Children could still be separated from committed parents, however, even if both lived on the same plantation. As a young child, John Day of Dayton cried when his father, Alfred, was sold. Thankfully, John's master had a heart affected by a boy's tears. Stricken with guilt, he repurchased Alfred and reunited parent and child. Few such incidents had a happy ending like this one, however.<sup>19</sup>

Two-parent households best provided children with parental role models and the close attention they craved. Within the nuclear family they learned morality and cultural values. Expressions of love for their parents reveal that slave families and households were enclaves that sheltered vulnerable youths in some respects from the horrors of slavery. Children cherished their parents for their unconditional love, prayers,

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<sup>18</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 9B:155-57, 9A:11-13, 4A:289-94.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 11B:243-45, 4A:302.



companionship, and guidance and respected them for their mettle. Children enjoyed learning how to work from their mothers and fathers—even during the days of slavery. Emmett Beal loved doing household chores with his mother; she taught him valuable lessons on how to keep away flies while churning butter. From her mother, who constantly cleaned the house and checked her for dirt, Drucilla Marten learned the virtue of cleanliness. Slave children were especially proud of their father's supplemental provisioning of the family, achieved by selling garden produce or homemade craft items. Boys particularly admired their fathers and wanted to emulate them. William Day acquired his work ethic from his father, whom he considered the most industrious and honest laborer he ever knew. Bell Williams bragged that his father was not only literate but learned, a man who read the Bible from beginning to end every year and served the slave community as a preacher and moral exemplar. James Loguen recalled fathers taking sons hunting and fishing and laughing about their adventures afterwards.<sup>20</sup>

Although children desired parental guidance and expected parental punishment, they resented parental abuse. An angry, confused, distraught, and sad ten-year old, Zek Brown ran away not from his master, who never beat him, but from his mother, who beat him with a rawhide whip. His home, his refuge from the world, had turned into a fearful

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<sup>20</sup> Blassingame, Slave Community, 82; Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, 493; Rawick, American Slave, 8A:127-28, 11B:243-45, 4A:89-94, 11A:149-52; Loguen, Rev. J. W. Loguen, 27-28.

place, and he responded by running away. What Zek no doubt wanted was a parent-child relationship like that which John Day and Bell Williams enjoyed.<sup>21</sup>

The most important factors in creating a slave childhood, then, were the vitality of the black family and the determination of black parents, even when living apart, to provide a nurturing environment for their children. In spite of all odds, most slaves experienced a stable family life. And even when orphaned by death or by sale, most children matured in an atmosphere of love and developed a sense of belonging not only to a family but also to a community.<sup>22</sup>

Whatever the household arrangements of slave children, they identified with and participated in the slave community. Slaves were, of course, members of a broader, biracial community wherever they lived, but their racial sub-community was what mattered more to them: there they found solace, formed strong bonds through work, leisure, and informal rituals, and secured a measure of autonomy. Black children looked forward to shucking corn, pulling flax, and making quilts with other blacks at after-harvest festivals and attending weekly get-togethers in the slave quarters, where they

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<sup>21</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 4A:166-68.

<sup>22</sup> For histories of the black family, see Stampp, Peculiar Institution, Blassingame, Slave Community, and Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll. Stevenson's Life in Black and White and Berlin's and Rowland's Families and Freedom should also be consulted with Herbert G. Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925 (New York, 1977).

learned to dance and watched as adults enjoyed recreation or participated in prayer meetings. During holidays, slaves customarily prepared themselves a feast. On Christmas morning, the more fortunate slave children found stockings hanging, from which they pulled small gifts given to them by their extended family. Children were embraced by the slave community during difficult times as well. When their parents were sold away or died, orphans found substitute parents within the slave community. Children saw charitable slaves helping out less able ones in the fields and heard them praying for each other and for God's blessing when troubles and afflictions arose. Such fellowship, in good times and bad, fostered a tight-knit community among slaves; within it, children learned wisdom through folk tales and songs and developed an individual personality when playing with others in unsupervised activities.<sup>23</sup>

For many children deprived of parents by death, abandonment, or sale, the slave community was an extended family that thwarted the theft of childhood. Other female adults commonly assisted mothers in their maternal duties when they had to work. Such women also cared for orphaned children. In Davidson County, John McCline's mother

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<sup>23</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (New York, 1903; reprint, 1989); Rawick, American Slave, 7A:45-47, 359-62, 8A:254-59; Registers of Signatures of Depositors in Branches of the Freedmen's Savings and Trust Company, 1865-1874, Memphis, r. 24, no. 1425, hereinafter cited as Register of Signatures, Memphis, National Archives, Washington, D. C. (microfilm); Blassingame, Slave Community; Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll.

died when he was two, and his father lived in an adjacent county; these circumstances forced him to live with his grandmother, who remained on Dr. James Hoggatt's plantation in Davidson County. Some substitute families, however, did not always fully meet the needs of young slaves. Annie Young of Sumner County lamented that she had "no mother, no father, nobody to lead . . . , teach . . . , or tell" her anything. She lived with anyone willing to house and feed her, doing "what they did" and what they asked of her. Annie yearned for what many other children had.<sup>24</sup>

Slave children knew the meaning of hard work yet made time for friends and for leisure activities. Although insisting that he did not have "a lazy bone" in his body, William Gant played his fiddle every day, and thought constantly of music while working in the field. He and others looked forward all week to unwinding at the Saturday night dance, where they wore their best clothes and frolicked late into the evening. Some children spent free time learning how to read. One was reported to have sneaked into the woods to practice spelling; after being caught by his master, he had to find another way to learn. Others found it more interesting to get into mischief. Maggie Broyles would secretly unlock her master's attic door to steal whisky, taking frequent nips from a ten-gallon drum. One time she went too far, drinking so much that it gave her a "chill" and

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<sup>24</sup> Furman, Slavery in the Clover Bottoms, 20-21; Rawick, American Slave, 7A:359-62.

made her sick. Other children enjoyed working in their parents' garden, playing games, fishing, or hunting; John McCline particularly looked forward to angling for catfish.<sup>25</sup>

Slaves found recreation in the church house, too, as well as spiritual food. Religion was important to children, as it was to the whole slave community. By the nineteenth century, much of slave life revolved around the black church, which provided its members with not only spiritual sustenance but also activities, instruction, and leadership opportunities. Many slaves lived a double religious life, presenting a reverent, orderly manner of worship in public while worshipping charismatically in private. But in nineteenth-century Tennessee, a land filled with Baptists, Methodists, and Cumberland Presbyterians, whites and blacks generally worshipped similarly. Slaves had more in common with white Baptists and Methodists than white Baptists and Methodists had with white Catholics, Episcopalians, and Reformed Presbyterians. Religion was often a means of subtle resistance by slaves; they expressed political sentiments hidden within religious ones. Many interpreted Christianity as a theology of liberation that contradicted the teachings of whites who insisted that the Bible endorsed slavery.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 9A:11-14, 8A:324-39, 6B:43-49; Andrea Sutcliffe, ed., Mighty Rough Times, I Tell You (Winston-Salem, 2000), 156; Furman, Slavery in the Clover Bottoms, 36-37; Frederick Douglass, The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, ed. David W. Blight (Boston, 1993), 43-63.

<sup>26</sup> Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau, eds., African American Religion: Interpretative Essays in History and Culture (New York, 1987); Albert J. Raboteau, Slave

Church services also offered children a respite from work and opportunities to improve themselves. They respected literate black preachers and aspired to one day be able to read the Bible as they did. After working all week under white supervision, many felt uninhibited at church, singing boisterously and moving their bodies rhythmically. Many, especially house slaves, enjoyed attending church with whites. In some churches a spiritual bond unified the races: "Niggers and whites shouted alike," remembered one slave. In other churches, slaves acted cautiously because whites attended the services looking for signs of insurrection.<sup>27</sup>

Through work and play and religion slave children found out who they were, acquired a sense of community, and experienced a genuine childhood. But not all slave children had the same encounters and workload. An individual's childhood depended on many factors. Domestic and field slaves related differently to whites and had contrasting work requirements, for example, and boys and girls experienced slavery differently.

House slave children, in many cases, essentially had white parents. They lived in the whites' house and participated in many of their activities, and thus formed a close

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Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South (New York, 1978), 320-22; Blassingame, Slave Community, 59-60, 98; John Boles, Black Southerners, 1619-1869 (Lexington, 1983), 162-68; Gayraud Wilmore, Black Radicalism: An Introduction of the Religious History of Afro-American People (Maryknoll, 1983).

<sup>27</sup> Douglass, Autobiography, 38, 40, 41; Rawick, American Slave, 7A:306-309, 203-207.

bond with them. Many masters provided for their house slaves as generously as they did for their own children, although some slave children no doubt felt like a pet instead of a family member. Many considered themselves white until they learned they were “a nigger.” Laura Redmoun relished the attention of her white mistress, who always defended her when the master threatened punishment. Consequently, Laura “had never been hit a lick in her life.” Because she frequently enjoyed house amenities and associated with whites, she considered herself a part of the family and was shocked to learn otherwise. Another house girl named Liza Jones, affectionately known as Cookie, respected her mistress, “a good old Christian woman.” She followed her everywhere, including church, and did almost everything with her, including spinning cotton. She tried to impress her mistress and win her approval as a child does with a parent. She, too, must have been surprised to learn that her blackness kept her apart from the family circle.<sup>28</sup>

House slaves interacted daily with white children and received benefits that field hands might never get. These domestic slaves understood that their lives were different from the lives of those in the field. “I didn’t have it as hard as some of the children in the quarters,” remembered Harriet Cheatham. If they did get dirt under their fingernails, it was from working in the vegetable garden under the generally lenient guidance of their white mistress. These children lived in the masters’ home and enjoyed sleeping by the

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<sup>28</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 5A:229-32, 9B:155-57; Sutcliffe, Mighty Rough Times, 156.

fireplace with their quilts on cold nights. Some slept with white children until their late teen years and did almost everything with whites, from going to church to eating meals. It was not unheard of for house slaves, like Maggie Pinkard, to be taught the three R's by the master's children. Some slaves acquired additional education by overhearing the master and mistress and their guests discussing literature, music, or politics. Furthermore, many house slaves were privy to the most intimate secrets of the white family. Such interaction with the white family obscured some children's "vision of bondage," blinding them to the cruelties of it.<sup>29</sup>

Despite such benefits and amenities, these children in some ways had it harder than field slaves. They were always under the scrutiny of whites. Work could be demanded of them anytime, day or night. And what was done for recreation often turned into work, for masters knew the talents of their slaves and required them at times. Maggie Pinkard, for example, was ordered to entertain her master's guests with her singing.<sup>30</sup>

Field slaves worked harder than house slaves and envied their comfortable circumstances. The daily routine of field slaves was punctuated by the sound of bells. On hearing the morning work bell, they trudged out to the fields with farming tools in

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<sup>29</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 6B:52-53, 9B:155-57, 12S:254-59; Sutcliffe, Mighty Rough Times, 163; Blassingame, Slave Community, 95.

<sup>30</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 8A:254-59.



hand. At noon, another bell signaled them to halt work and eat dinner, after which they resumed their toil and kept at it until dusk. Their work was grueling, but it was apportioned by age. For instance, a boy of twelve might be expected to do one quarter of a man's labor. Nevertheless, some field children, recalled one former slave, "had it might[y] hard." Not all children's labor was devoted to the crops. At age ten, Mary Divine stacked bricks, so others could carry them. Other tasks of children included tending livestock, feeding chickens, preserving meat, and making soup. Nor could field slaves hope to rest after the harvest; many were hired out to other whites during the off-season, some of them to work in non-agricultural jobs in which they learned new skills.<sup>31</sup>

The diet of field slaves depended on the generosity and prosperity of their owner. By today's standards, most slave children were malnourished. One indication of this is that they were much shorter on average than children today. In some cases this nutritional deprivation began very early in the slave child's life: some masters required female slaves to work in the field shortly after child birth, which interfered with breastfeeding (now known to enhance a child's health and growth). A child's growth also depended on the amount of meat the master provided.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 8A:254-59, 11:102-105, 11B:243-48, 373-77, 8A:324-29; Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, 502-503. For a good introduction to aural history, see Mark M. Smith, Listening to Nineteenth Century America (Chapel Hill, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Richard H. Steckel, "Women, Work, and Health Under Plantation Slavery in the United States," in More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas

Field slaves, however, had one precious commodity denied to house slaves: time away from whites, after sundown and on Sundays. Some enjoyed even more time away from white control, for on the larger plantations children too young to work were commonly tended by an older slave woman in what amounted to a day-care center. On other plantations, until turning twelve, small children worked for black drivers. After a hard day's work, older slave children enjoyed relaxing with their parents and extended family. With all of this association with blacks, many field children no doubt felt more connected to the slave community than did house children.<sup>33</sup>

Gender was also a powerful force in the life of slave children. Boys and girls on Tennessee plantations probably had experiences similar to those across the Lower South, as revealed by historical research. Girls started working earlier than boys and until age seventeen or so were generally more productive (probably because females physically mature faster than males). By the age of seven, 53 percent of girls and 44 percent of boys had started working. On plantations, 50 percent of males and 21 percent of females

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(Bloomington, 1996), eds. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, 43-60. Slave and poor-white children may have been similarly malnourished. See Charles E. Beveridge and Charles Capen McLaughlin, et al., eds., Slavery in the South, 1852-1857 (Baltimore, 1981), Vol. 2 of Beveridge and McLaughlin, et al., eds., The Papers of Frederick Law Olmstead, 6 vols. (Baltimore, 1977-1992).

<sup>33</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 7A:45-47, 11B:373-77; Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, 502.

worked regularly as field hands. Children normally performed the same jobs as their parents, girls assuming their mother's work and boys their father's. Only males learned the trades: blacksmithing and masonry, for example. Most females performed domestic duties, such as nannying or cleaning. Gender also affected male and female children in areas other than work. One girl, for instance, fled from her master because he made sexual advances toward her, but he eventually caught her and "made her have him"; she was forced to continue the relationship to avoid punishment, and in time she bore a number of "nearly white" children.<sup>34</sup>

Not a few children had a white father, most commonly their master or overseer. At some point in their lives, slave children became aware of miscegenation, observing that some among them had "brown skin" and others had "bright" skin. Darker children also noticed that their light-skinned friends were in many cases treated better than others and were usually house slaves. According to one darker slave, "None of [the light-skinned] were ever sold." Yet some mulatto children experienced the same difficulties as their darker peers. In an unusual instance, Maggie Broyles, whose Irish-born father was a hired man on the farm, suffered the same fate as those whose slave parents were sold. Maggie's father left her mother to "marry" someone from another plantation. In most cases, lighter skinned children knew that their pigmentation brought certain benefits, so

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<sup>34</sup> Steckel, "Women, Work, and Health," 50-53; Sutcliffe, Mighty Rough Times, 162; Rawick, American Slave, 7A:359-62.

they associated, and sometimes identified, with whites to separate themselves from the dark world of slavery.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, some whites acted in such a paternalistic way that it threatened the bond between slave parent and child. There were undoubtedly times when house slave children became jealous of the attention that their mothers showed to white children. Such jealousy could turn a cheerful household into a tense and uncomfortable one. On large plantations, black women commonly cared for the master's young children, nursing, feeding, and generally watching over them; naturally, a close relationship developed between caregiver and child. Slave children knew that their mothers "loved the [white] children" and that the children, in turn, were "crazy" about their black mammies. In such situations the maternal attention that black children craved may have been divided between them and their master's children. Drucilla Marten's mother protected the master's children like her own. When young men courted Missie Pinter, the master's daughter, Drucilla's mother interrogated them about their intentions and family background. Drucilla was impressed by how her mother spoke to the white beaux, but she may well have experienced jealousy when her mother remarked that no "poor white trash" would marry her "white daughter."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Blassingame, Slave Community, 82-86; Rawick, American Slave, 8A:324-28; Sutcliffe, Mighty Rough Times, 156.

<sup>36</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 4A:113-16, 11B:243-45.

Although children generally respected and admired their parents and craved their attention, some may have discounted the parent-child relationship and relied instead on white paternalism for their needs. While most slave children considered their parents strong (especially after they had matured enough fully to comprehend their parents' actions) they knew their masters had control over their parents. Although the constant threat of cruelty existed, masters were often kind, giving substance to their paternalistic words. Many black children, especially house slaves, received gifts from whites and perhaps wondered why their parents could not give them such things. In Wilson County, Bert Luster was grateful that his "white folks," treated him so "good"; he ate the same food they did, including turkey, duck, fish, beef, and deer. Although slave parents provided for children whenever they could, some children understood that they depended solely on whites for certain luxuries.<sup>37</sup>

A paternalistic master, however, had total control and could punish at will. Of course blacks were not mere victims; they had influence over the master, but seemingly all that was done was done with his approval. Slave marriage, for instance, recalled a former slave, was "sometimes accommodated to the affections" of blacks, but was "always to the interest of the slaveholder." So although slave children had a childhood, that childhood existed in part because many masters deemed it best that slaves have a

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<sup>37</sup> Blassingame, Slave Community, 96-102; Rawick, American Slave, 7A:203-207.

stable family life. In making a house a home, of course, slave parents overcame the inherent obstacles within the slave regime and made the best of a bad situation.<sup>38</sup>

The Civil War offered slaves a chance to take control of their family's destiny. But the events of the war were unpredictable, and life was disrupted in unforeseeable ways. Slave children in particular not only experienced emancipation but also hardship and violence. When the dust of war had settled, some things had changed; others seemed to remain the same.

Amid a chorus of minority dissent sung mainly by East Tennesseans, Tennessee seceded from the United States on June 8, 1861, and joined the new Confederate States of America. The Confederate experiment seemed short-lived, for by June 1862 Memphis and Nashville were occupied by Union troops. Confederates quickly recovered from their initial setbacks, only to suffer further defeats in 1863, including the loss of Chattanooga and Knoxville. Even though Union forces occupied every major Tennessee town by the end of 1863, Confederate resistance continued. But the cavalry and guerilla raids and the desperate attempt by the Confederate army to recapture Nashville in late 1864 never seriously threatened Union control.<sup>39</sup>

The Yankee invasion was the realization of a dream for black Tennesseans, for it brought in its wake disruptions that ultimately destroyed slavery. With the outbreak of

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<sup>38</sup> Loguen, Rev. J. W. Loguen, 38.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas L. Connelly, Civil War Tennessee: Battles and Leaders (Knoxville, 1979).

war in 1861, slaves speculated among themselves about what it might mean, hoping that it would usher in the long awaited Day of Jubilee: emancipation. This war, this cataclysm, they thought, could mean freedom; however, some wondered how their liberators would treat them and whether their circumstances would truly improve. Many decided to take their chances with the Northern invaders. As Yankee forces conquered Tennessee, slaves left their masters in droves and sought refuge within Union lines. Eventually their freedom was recognized. Others stayed on with their owners but successfully demanded wages or other compensation—a dramatic change from antebellum days. As historian Stephen Ash has noted, the turning point of the war for slaves was when they realized they were freemen and masters understood that they no longer controlled them.<sup>40</sup>

The chronology of Union occupation strongly influenced the actions of Tennessee slaves. Slavery in West and Middle Tennessee began eroding with the arrival of Yankees in early 1862. Many black refugees, men, women, and children, migrated to Nashville, Memphis, and other towns, and some labored for the Union: men built earthworks and

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<sup>40</sup> Lester Lamon, Blacks in Tennessee, 1791-1970 (Knoxville, 1981); Ira Berlin, et al., eds., The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South (Cambridge, 1993), Ser. I, Vol. 2 of Berlin, et al., eds., Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867 (Cambridge, 1985- ); Clarence H. Mohr, On The Threshold of Freedom: Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia (Athens, 1986); Ash, Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 108; Cimprich, Slavery's End, 19-32, 60-80, 98-117.

laid rail tracks while women worked as laundresses and cooks. With the invasion of East Tennessee in the autumn of 1863, slavery began disintegrating there, too. The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 meant little to Tennessee slaves because the state was exempted from it. The appointment of Andrew Johnson as military governor in 1862 initially meant very little, too. He and other authorities opposed emancipation and the use of black troops until wartime circumstances and political pressure overcame their opposition. By 1863 the Union army had become an agent of emancipation in the state, in spite of the exemption. By 1864, black male Tennesseans had volunteered in great numbers to fight, and slavery was nearing its end. Meeting in January 1865 and claiming to represent loyalists, the State Convention proposed among other things an emancipation amendment, which was ratified on February 22, 1865. Most slaves, however, were essentially living as free people well before that date.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ira Berlin, et al., eds., The Destruction of Slavery (Cambridge, 1985), Ser. I, Vol. I, of Berlin, Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation; Berlin, Genesis of Free Labor; Berlin and Rowland, Families and Freedom; Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., Free At Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War (New York, 1992); Stephen V. Ash, When The Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861-1865 (Chapel Hill, 1995); Mark Grimsley and Brooks D. Simpson, eds., The Collapse of the Confederacy (Lincoln, 2001); Mark Grimsley and Clifford J. Rogers, Civilians in the Path of War (Lincoln, 2002); Cimprich, Slavery's End.



The Civil War, then, offered blacks freedom and opportunity, but the chaos of war produced difficulties for freedmen, not the least of which was maintaining a stable family. Refugeeing and wartime employment tore black families apart at a rate unknown in antebellum Tennessee, and black children under 12 no doubt wondered what had happened to their predictable and relatively carefree life. Moreover, the transformation from bondage to freedom seemed in some ways to be a transition from Southern paternalism to Northern guardianship. The Union army had liberated slaves from white Southerners, but not altogether from white control and paternalism, for Northerners substituted their own versions. Blacks were once more forced to bow to white power.

During the war, slaves' domestic life underwent a transformation and endured problems theretofore unimaginable. Refugeeing, for one thing, had the potential to strengthen or weaken black family bonds. When parents heard news of advancing Yankees and decided to flee to them with their children, they embarked on a dangerous journey. Some children, on the other hand, were abandoned by fleeing parents who valued independence and a new beginning more than they did their offspring. Walter Jones and his mother of Hardeman County were left alone when Walter's father went off to seek freedom on his own. Other slave fathers chose to leave their families to fight for the Union and help win their freedom. Many black veterans never returned to their children, however, and some who did were never the same. In Bolivar, Emmett Beal's father joined the Union army, ultimately returning to him a physically, and perhaps emotionally, scarred man. Other refugee fathers were separated forcefully from their families. Not only fathers but mothers sometimes left their children parentless. Asbury Gibbon's wife left him during the war and married another man, leaving a four-year-old

motherless. Young Francis Barton was devastated when his mother abandoned him; in his case, whites assumed parental roles. Some mothers left their children with their masters to join husbands who had been recently impressed or had enlisted in the Union army. For instance, the wife of soldier Samuel Emery of Wilson County followed him to his Nashville post, leaving her four children in the care of their mistress, Eveline Blair. The children lived with the possibility of never seeing their parents again, that is if Blair had anything to do with it.<sup>42</sup>

Some refugees were seized by Yankee soldiers, separated from their families, and forced into military labor. In a case near Nashville that equaled the horrors of anything done by a slave owner, children wailed as federal troops dragged their fathers away to work on fortifications without pay. Other refugees were taken far from their homes in other states and ended up in Tennessee. In one such case, the wives and children of slave men conscripted in Alabama were taken to Memphis, where they wandered “suffering for food” and ultimately went to work in a cotton warehouse.<sup>43</sup>

Some children left hopefully for Union lines only to encounter hostility. Many Union commanders considered refugees to be hindrances to their military mission,

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<sup>42</sup> Mohr, On The Threshold of Freedom; Rawick, American Slave, 9B:171-72, 8A:127-28; Register of Signatures, Memphis, no. 124; Sutcliffe, Mighty Rough Times, 92-95; Berlin, Genesis of Free Labor, 462-63.

<sup>43</sup> Berlin, Genesis of Free Labor, 423-24, 426.

depleting supplies and provisions and encumbering troop movement. Black children in particular were regarded as burdensome. Andrew Johnson complained that black women and children took up housing and rations but gave no useful labor in return. Regarding black children in a way that mirrored his tough military leadership, Major General George Thomas dismissed them as not only a burden but absolutely useless. Major General S. A. Hurlbut considered children “incapable of army labor, a weight and incumbrance.” Many children tramped for miles with their families only to be turned away by unsympathetic Union officers and forced into vagabondage.<sup>44</sup>

Many women and children who were denied asylum by Union officers settled outside of Union lines to be near their husbands, sons, or fathers. The shantytowns they established were plagued by poverty and crime, yet they allowed men, women, and children to remain a family unit. Soldiers often traveled to the settlements to visit their families and brought food and other gifts. This no doubt reminded some children of separated two-parent families during the time of slavery, when fathers visited their children on the weekends. But despite blacks’ best efforts to maintain family unity, Union officials often stepped in and, whether intentionally or not, divided black families once again. Outside of Memphis lay a settlement of several hundred women and children who depended entirely on the support of their husbands and fathers, soldiers of a regiment stationed in Memphis. These men made every attempt to provide for their

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<sup>44</sup> Berlin, Destruction of Slavery, 278, 304; Berlin, Genesis of Free Labor, 412-13, 432-33.

families; some stole food, clothing, and garden tools for them. The thievery became such a problem that the post commander ordered the settlement to be broken up and the refugees relocated to President's Island in the Mississippi River. Still wanting to protect, provide for, and be with their families, some fathers turned their guns on their Union comrades, forcing Captain T. A. Walker, superintendent of freedmen in Memphis, to send troops to the shantytown to restore order.<sup>45</sup>

Some older children, typically males, independently fled from their master. Jim Heiskell, a thirteen-year-old from rural East Tennessee, ran away from his master because, as he claimed, he was overworked and whipped three or four times a week. He fled to Knoxville, where he hoped to reunite with his brother. But there he was spotted by his master's overseer, who chased him down and beat him. However, with his brother's help Jim escaped once again, and ultimately found work at a hospital.<sup>46</sup>

Many families fled miserable conditions in the rural areas of Tennessee and surrounding states in hope of finding opportunities in Tennessee's towns. Memphis, Nashville, Clarksville, Chattanooga, and Knoxville were especially popular destinations; the black population of these towns, especially Memphis, increased dramatically during the war. Jim Heiskell, for one, absconded from rural East Tennessee not only to escape

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<sup>45</sup> Berlin, Genesis of Free Labor, 367-86; Berlin, Families and Freedom, 73-76; Berlin, Destruction of Slavery, 304, 249-68.

<sup>46</sup> Berlin, Families and Freedom, 41-43.

his abusive master and find his brother but also to “see some pleasure” in Knoxville. William Walker’s family escaped to Nashville, where schooling and other opportunities were to be found. But for many the opportunities of the towns proved to be mirages. Black families in many cases left bad conditions only to find worse. Nashville, for instance, was a notoriously deplorable place for freedmen. Consequently, the main concern of many became not obtaining an education or enjoying other benefits of urban life, but simply surviving. Nevertheless, many children did find in the towns opportunities unavailable elsewhere, not the least of which were schools and some freedom from abuse.<sup>47</sup>

Not every slave fled to the towns or to Union army camps. Many were never in close proximity to Union troops; others were too old, too feeble, or too young to migrate. Many others decided to stay with their masters, for they feared the changes that freedom brought. On some farms, families carried on customary routines: parents worked, children played. Some parents sought to shelter their children from the war. Will Burks, for example, was curious about the war, but his parents refused to answer his questions and sent him off to play. Henry Walker recalled playing in the woods during the war and picking nuts for adults to sell at the market. John McCline of Davidson County

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.; Rawick, American Slave, 7A:312-13; Peter Maslowski, Treason Must Be Made Odious: Military Occupation and Wartime Reconstruction in Nashville, Tennessee (Millwood, 1978), 110-11; Ash, Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 52, 106-142; Berlin, Free At Last, 391.

remembered little children, as late as 1863, picking apples and peaches for women to have a paring bee.<sup>48</sup>

Yankee occupation triggered not only black but also white migration, which in turn affected black family stability. In many cases, children were relocated when their masters fled from advancing troops. Henry Walker, for instance, temporarily left his family to accompany his master to Arkansas to find a refuge from invading Yankees. Once they secured a new home, the master sent for Henry's family, which was soon reunited. Other times, the master left slaves on the homestead as he fled for refuge. In June 1863, Dr. William Bonner of Fayetteville did exactly that. Three families (fourteen slaves) remained on the farm and operated as independent yeomen, raising hogs, corn, and cotton. On farms like these children lived a life devoid of white intervention and probably worked like those of any other yeoman until masters returned and tried to reassert their control, as Bonner did in February 1865.<sup>49</sup>

Some Tennessee masters forced unproductive or unmanageable adult slaves to leave the premises while endeavoring to keep valuable and tractable children. So in another way black family stability was threatened by wartime circumstances. A Germantown slave owner named Larodes expelled Amey Carrington from his farm in

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<sup>48</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 8A: 338, 11A: 28-32; Furman, Slavery in the Clover Bottoms, 42, 48.

<sup>49</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 11A:28-32; Berlin, Free At Last, 329-30.

June 1863, yet maintained possession of her four children; she was able to regain them only in June 1865, with the help of Union officers. In Memphis, three children, ages ten, seven, and four, remained with a Dr. Wheaton, who sent their parents away to a nearby contraband camp. Their mother tried desperately to regain them, at one point sneaking them away from Wheaton and into the camp. Union commanders, however, returned the children, despite their pleas and the mother's tearful protestations, because Dr. Wheaton had accused the mother of child abuse.<sup>50</sup>

The hiring-out process also separated families during the war. Some masters hired out children to the Confederate army. Fourteen-year-old Ruff Abernathy, for example, cooked for hospital doctors, moving from one hospital to another as the invading Yankees forced the Confederate army to retreat. Ruff was separated from his home and family for three years, making money for his master.<sup>51</sup>

Even if they stayed on the farm or plantation, children saw that wartime circumstances undermined their master's authority. Children heard other slaves and whites discuss war and emancipation. The older children knew that their masters feared the Yankees, and why, and understood what the defeat of the Confederacy would mean. William Davis, hearing his master lamenting Confederate defeats and Yankee rule,

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<sup>50</sup> Berlin, Destruction of Slavery, 307; Berlin, Families and Freedom, 32-36.

<sup>51</sup> Ruff Abernathy, 18 June 1921, Tennessee Colored Soldier's Pension Applications, vol. 1, hereinafter cited as TCSPA, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, (microfilm).

realized that the war had “changed everything up.” Many slave children saw their master flee in fear from invading Yankees, or, if the master chose to stay, saw him meekly taking orders from the occupiers. Many masters threw up their hands in frustration because their slaves no longer obeyed their command: planter John H. Bills remarked, “My people seem Contented [and] happy, but not inclined to work.” Not all masters lost control of their farms or households, however, at least not until the Union army made its presence fully felt. Nathan Jones, for example, watched as fellow slaves were whipped by his master until “blood gushed from their backs.”<sup>52</sup>

Children were amazed by the awesome sights and sounds of war. Early in the war, children, particularly boys, enjoyed the spectacle of marching men and were excited by the idea of war. Standing outside his house, Will Burks saw a grand sight: marching columns at least “a mile long.” William Harris, too, watched wide-eyed as Federal troops marched by; he was especially impressed by cavalymen on white horses. Henry Walker, however, was more taken by flashy uniforms. John McCline was fascinated by the long columns of young, enthusiastic Confederates marching to war. As the war continued, many black children grew accustomed to the sight of troops traversing the countryside.

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<sup>52</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 4A:289-94, 11A:28-32, 12S:254-59, 17A:359-62, 6B:118-19; Leon F. Litwack, Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery (New York, 1979), 109.



All too familiar with the sounds of war, some even learned to identify the different bugle calls.<sup>53</sup>

Often, however, the initial amazement and excitement turned to fear and revulsion. After his family escaped to Nashville, William Walker's young eyes and ears were assaulted by the horrible sights and sounds of battle. He heard the "boom of cannons" and the "rumble of army wagons" and saw "arms shot off, legs gone [and] faces blood smeared." In Bedford County, William Gant heard battles raging as far away as seven miles: the roar of gunfire and the shaking of the ground "scared and distressed" everyone in his vicinity. Children also saw a changed environment: barns and houses and fences destroyed and fields stripped of crops. Near Chattanooga, one witness reported that foraging troops took all the crops, leaving "not a blade of grass or corn." Foraging expeditions in Middle Tennessee, too, stripped farms; slaves who remained in the region's countryside struggled along with whites to survive in a land ravaged by its occupiers.<sup>54</sup>

Thus the wartime experience of children was frequently, perhaps predominantly, one of family separation, change, and violence. Black children may have suffered as much if not more at the hands of Yankee occupiers as they did at the hands of their

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<sup>53</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 8A:338, 4A:183-84, 11A:28-32; Furman, Slavery in the Clover Bottoms, 41.

<sup>54</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 7A:312-23, 9A:53-55; O. R., Series One, 31(3):189.

owners. Neither had a spotless record of benevolent paternalism. Both separated families and exploited their labor.

A common wartime experience of children was abuse from Yankee soldiers. Not a few concluded that, as one historian has written, “life under the Stars and Stripes held no more promise of freedom than that under the Stars and Bars.” Instead of starting a life of freedom when the Yankees came, Jake Goodridge, who had served his master as a body servant, was likewise forced to be a “waitin’ boy” for his supposed liberators; at the war’s end he was abandoned by his Yankee captors with not a penny of compensation for his service. Yankees always seemed to have an eye out for boys who might make good body servants: in Clarksville, for example, two teen-aged boys were taken from their mistress to serve Union officers. Some Yankees enjoyed forcing black youngsters to demean themselves. Annie Young watched as one boy, who had been given liquor by some soldiers, was forced to sing drunkenly:

God Damned if I Don’t

Kill a Nigger

Oh Whooley Boys! Oh Whooley!

Oh Whooley Boys! Oh Whooley!

Children who stayed on the farm frequently witnessed invading Yankees take everything and anything they could use. The sacking of Southern homes left some children without clothes and without means of replacing them. Slaves of John H. Bill’s plantation in West Tennessee considered it pointless to work, for Union troops would probably take everything. The widespread pillaging and destruction carried out by the Union army as it

sought to provision itself, crush the secessionist spirit, and cripple the Southern war effort hurt whites and blacks alike.<sup>55</sup>

A number of young slave boys served in the Confederate army as officer's body servants, had battlefield experience, and consequently identified with the Confederate army. A survey of state pension applications, submitted by some of them in the 1920s, reveals that they were typically about fifteen years old when they accompanied their master to war. Although not yet men, in many cases these servants performed manly duties. Jake Goodridge served his master dutifully in the rebel army while, ironically, his brother served in the Union army. The war was, for Jake's family, a war of brother against brother, as it was for many white families. Some body servants proved themselves to be "true and Loyal Confederate[s]" who stayed "until the last gun was fired," stated one Southern white. Even after his master died, Ruben Hale remained in the 4<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Infantry. Henry Youree and Chase Wilkerson also stayed with their regiments for the war's duration. Loyal Confederate hospital servant Ruff Abernathy was forced by United States officials to take the oath of allegiance after the war. Other servants simply did their duty. Many of these body servants witnessed the awful carnage of combat and risked death themselves. W. M. Easley of Hickman County "was wounded by a stray bullet" at Shiloh. At the same time, the war offered these boys

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<sup>55</sup> Ash, Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 108; Rawick, American Slave, 9A:53-55, 7A:359-62, 75-77, 12S:254-59; Berlin, Destruction of Slavery, 273; Blassingame, Slave Community, 273; Litwack, Been in the Storm So Long, 109.

adventure and opportunity. Many traveled extensively for the first time. Elijah Schoolfield, for instance, marched alongside Confederate troops and saw much of western Tennessee.<sup>56</sup>

Reconstruction in Tennessee did not wait for the cessation of hostilities. In February 1862, following the Union army's successful invasion of Middle Tennessee, Andrew Johnson was appointed military governor. While Johnson worked to get the state back into the Union, one of the biggest wartime reconstruction efforts was the establishment of "contraband camps." Not knowing exactly what to do with the many "contrabands" who fled to the Union lines, the army set up camps for them beginning in March 1863. The camps were located primarily but not exclusively in Middle and West Tennessee. These crowded facilities provided army officers with military recruits and Northern teachers and missionaries with students and converts. They also helped prepare African Americans for postwar life and served as the nucleus of postwar black neighborhoods. The camps offered black children new opportunities for both debauchery

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<sup>56</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 9A:53-55; Ruben Grissom Hale, 13 June 1921, Henry Youree, 16 June 1921, Chase Wilkerson, 9 July 1921, Ruff Abernathy, 18 June 1921, Sam Cullin, 9 July 1921, W. M. Easley, 16 June 1921, Elijah Schoolfield, 7 July 1921, TCPSA.

and moral uplift and probably caused not a few blacks to wonder if they had simply traded masters instead of escaping bondage.<sup>57</sup>

Living conditions in the contraband camps were in many cases terrible. For many freed people, writes historian John Cimprich, the “promising beacon” of freedom had merely “led to the torments of poverty.” When refugees arrived in the camps, the Union quartermaster seized any livestock they might have brought. At the same time, however, he gave them clothes to replace their tattered rags. These actions seemed to contradict the Yankees’ declared mission of teaching free-labor values, for they made the black refugees dependent on the government. Inadequate shelter was a common problem in the camps. Many blacks were consigned to small, shabby cabins no better than the slave cabins they had left, and in some cases worse. These cabins were actually the better dwellings in camps, however. Many blacks were not so fortunate as to have them. In the Gallatin camp there were no cabins, but only tents, wholly insufficient to insulate children from the winter’s cold.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ash, Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 135-36; Bergeron, Ash, and Keith, Tennesseans, 166-72.

<sup>58</sup> Cimprich, Slavery’s End, 46; Berlin, Genesis of Free Labor, 449, 460-61; Susan Hawkins, “The African American Experience at Forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson, 1862-1867,” Tennessee Historical Quarterly 61 (2002):222-41.

The army's requirement that the camps have regular health inspections was not always obeyed, and disease, especially pneumonia, was widespread. In some cases, particularly the Memphis camp, there were medicine shortages. Army officials admitted that "the rate of mortality was large" in Memphis; during the harsh winter of 1862-63, twelve hundred contraband camp residents died, three hundred of them children. Children in the Nashville camps had perhaps the worst experiences of all, for they were "grossly neglected in all things." During the winter of 1862-1863, these children suffered not only from hunger but also frostbite; many children were among the thirty or so contrabands who died each day and were buried in a mass grave adjacent to one of the camps. Black soldiers with wives and children in the Nashville camp complained to their superiors about the deplorable conditions and demanded improvements. It turned out that the problem stemmed in great part from the corruption of the Union officer commanding the Nashville-area camps, who sold good allotted to freedmen and kept the money.<sup>59</sup>

The problems of Nashville camps and others also stemmed from overcrowding. Quarters were cramped and often primitive, and the poorly-clad and-fed children in such places were highly susceptible to disease. To reduce overcrowding, the army redistributed women and children among the camps by rail. But these trips were sometimes unpleasant; for instance, the decrepit and children were "dumped" at the

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<sup>59</sup> James Marten, The Children's Civil War (Chapel Hill, 1998), 130; Hawkins, "African American Experience," 238; Maslowski, Treason Must Be Made Odious, 110; Berlin, Families and Freedom, 77-78.

Chattanooga depot while officers decided their ultimate destination. Conditions were so bad in some places that slavery seemed preferable. One slave woman left a camp after her husband died there and returned to her master's home, vowing that she would not return to the camp; almost anywhere, she thought, was better than that place.<sup>60</sup>

Wherever they were Tennessee freedmen could not escape white paternalism. Whites continued to tell them how to live and what to do. Northerners no less than white Southerners thought blacks should live according to their standards and had no qualms about forcing them to do so. In some cases Yankee paternalism actually helped blacks achieve their own economic, political, and social goals; in other cases, it only satisfied the desires of Northern reformers and politicians.

Yankee reformers strongly encouraged freedmen to form nuclear families based on the Northern middle-class model. Some, however, doubted that blacks had the moral wherewithal to sustain such a family. Asa S. Fiske, a Freedmen's Department official, believed them capable. Chaplain John Eaton, however, was skeptical: "Most contrabands," he wrote, "felt no familial obligations whatsoever." To cut down on sexual promiscuity at the Grand Junction contraband camp, Eaton mandated marriages for all couples. Marriage, he taught, was "a new privilege" that offered freedmen "control and guidance" as they entered the world of freedom. Eaton's order was not unique. General Lorenzo Thomas ordered junior officers to formalize black marriages "in compliance

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<sup>60</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 139-40; R. D. Mussey to Maj. C. W. Foster, 10 Oct. 1864, [www.coax.net/people/lwf/rpt\\_rdm.html](http://www.coax.net/people/lwf/rpt_rdm.html).

with the ordinance of God.” Legal marriages, Northern reformers believed, provided children with a proper example of family and helped to ensure that they would be cared for.<sup>61</sup>

Children in the camps learned Victorian family values watching couples formalize their pre-existing relationships in mass ceremonies. They were taught that people should have only one spouse and be “true to the thought of [him or her] in all separations,” preached one Northern missionary, “avoiding improper intimacy with any other ‘till God shall separate [them] by death.’ ” Boys learned that they should “love and cherish” their wives, treating her with honor and respect and supporting her through “manly industry and energy.” Manliness, boys were taught, entailed providing for one’s spouse and working diligently. Girls were taught that they should help their future husband achieve manliness by aiding “him diligently in gaining an honorable livelihood” and that they should “be true” to him “in prosperity or adversity.”<sup>62</sup>

These mass ceremonies must have been an enjoyable experience for the young. It was not unusual to see forty to seventy-five couples being married simultaneously. Children saw women wearing pretty ribbons and bright colors. Younger couples made

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<sup>61</sup> Cimprich, *Slavery’s End*, 74-75; Edwin B. Washington, Jr., ed., “Freedmen’s Bureau Marriage Certificates,” [www.rootsweb.com/~vaggsv/freedmen\\_record\\_description.html](http://www.rootsweb.com/~vaggsv/freedmen_record_description.html).

<sup>62</sup> L. Humphreys to [?], 20 Aug. 1863, American Missionary Association Manuscripts, Tennessee, r. 2, Amistad Research Center, Dillard University, New Orleans (microfilm).



the day one of celebration, a public affirmation of their love. But children must have seen apathetic faces, too, for many older couples were less celebratory and participated in the ceremony only because of social pressure, regarding themselves as “married for years.”<sup>63</sup>

Victorian values were reinforced in the contraband camp schools that children attended. Northern missionaries, the vanguard of Northern ideology, took up residence in camps across the state and used the classroom to inculcate principles of free labor, Christianity, and citizenship. Although children learned rapidly, a contraband camp school was not an ideal educational environment. Like the camp itself, schools were overcrowded. Children commonly had a hundred or so classmates, adults as well as children, and the schoolrooms were often scenes of near anarchy. To make matters worse, many mothers brought infants. When not distracted by crying babies, students were distracted by the frequent introduction of new classmates.<sup>64</sup>

At camp schools and churches, black children were exposed to the religious ideas of Northerners. Many Northerners marched south armed not with the sword but with the Bible, wielding it to redeem the presumably bedeviled South. Reformers believed that

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Rev. J. W. Wait, “United Presbyterians Mission Among the Freedmen in Nashville,” in Historical Sketch of the Freedmen’s Missions of the United Presbyterian Church, 1862-1904 (Knoxville, 1904); Cimprich, Slavery’s End, 47, 50, 53, 75-80.

children, in particular, must be exposed to the ideas of free labor, millennialist Protestant doctrine, and middle-class values, for they were the future, the first free generation of African Americans. Such Northern paternalism was deemed necessary if black children were to be incorporated into a new labor system. In his paternalistic way, John Eaton respected the religious nature of the freedmen and acknowledged their understanding of the fundamentals of Christianity. He extolled their supposedly child-like faith, claiming that they were “not troubled, like educated white men, with unbelief.” Yet like many other Northerners, he deemed them immoral and too emotional in their worship.<sup>65</sup>

While benevolent societies and Union officers worked inside and outside the camps promoting Victorian values, army impressment and recruitment in the camps undermined black family stability. According to historian Peter Ripley, “Federal officials considered men soldiers and workers first, husbands and fathers second.” Black fathers taken by the army could hardly assume Victorian paternal roles, especially if they received no compensation. As of August 1863, 11,000 freedmen in Tennessee were serving the United States as teamsters, laborers, cooks, or servants. Many worked without pay, some no doubt wondering bitterly if they were simply slaves with a new master: the State. Major General George Stearns, a sincere advocate for the freedmen in

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<sup>65</sup> Eric Foner, Reconstruction: The Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877 (New York, 1988), 88-95, 98-99.

Tennessee, complained that men were being impressed “everywhere” and not receiving a penny for their labor. Many died while laboring for nothing for the government.<sup>66</sup>

Many other fathers were paid for their service, including soldiers; however, they were no less separated from their children than those unpaid. Contraband camps became recruitment stations for the Union army, thereby removing able-bodied men from their families. Some enlisted under duress. Many no doubt pondered the irony that they now had no more control over their family than during the days of slavery.<sup>67</sup>

Contraband camps were never meant to be anything more than a temporary refuge and a way station on the road to freedom. Government officials feared that freedmen, whom they considered dependent already, would learn in camps to depend on the government for their every need. Thus, they sought to introduce blacks to free labor.

The program that was eventually instituted removed women, children, and older men from the contraband camps and placed them on plantations where they entered into contracts with employers and worked for wages. Most of these plantations had been abandoned by secessionist owners and seized by the United States army or Treasury Department, and were being run by loyal white men (many of them Northerners) under

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<sup>66</sup> Peter Ripley, Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana (Baton Rouge, 1976), 159; Berlin, Genesis of Free Labor, 398, 412-17; Maslowski, Treason Must Be Made Odious, 102.

<sup>67</sup> Berlin, Destruction of Slavery, 209-210; Berlin, Genesis of Free Labor, 440-41.

government aegis. Many Northerners believed that these plantations would benefit blacks by inculcating free-labor values. Life in these places, however, must have reminded freedmen of slavery, for they generally worked in gangs cultivating cotton and were forbidden to leave the plantation during the term of their contract. Moreover, many laborers worked without their families, having been separated from them when refugeeing or living in contraband camps or when government officials moved them to free-labor plantations. Furthermore, Northern officers in many cases expected these freedmen to return to plantations in areas from which they had earlier fled in search of freedom and opportunity.<sup>68</sup>

The frequent use of traditional supervision and labor methods on some free-labor plantations in Tennessee did not mean that Union officials were altogether uninterested in the welfare of the freedmen. Many evinced genuine concern for them. John Eaton, for one, worked hard on the freedmen's behalf and insisted that most could adapt to the dramatic changes that freedom brought. As head of freedmen's affairs in West Tennessee, he even established "home farms" for the "infirm and idle," making sure everyone was provided for. Other officials started schools on plantations to help children adapt to freedom. If free-labor and Victorian values were to prevail in freedmen

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<sup>68</sup> Louis S. Gerteis, From Contraband to Freedmen: Federal Policy Toward Southern Blacks, 1861-1865 (Westport, 1973), 151, 164; Lawrence N. Powell, New Masters: Northern Planters During the Civil War and Reconstruction (New Haven, 1980), 54-87; Maslowski, Treason Must Be Made Odious, 114.

communities, believed many Northerners, their acceptance must start with black children, and must start immediately. So Union officials started schools wherever possible; thus, free-labor plantation life involved more than just hard work.<sup>69</sup>

But children's experiences on a loyalist's plantation were similar to those on a secessionist's, in that much depended on white paternalism. Children were at the mercy of the Union officers and plantation supervisors, who were obligated to provide for and guard children. Some Northerners looked out for freedmen. General Grenville Dodge, for one, removed refugees from the Pulaski camp and placed them on a plantation under the supervision of freedpeople. Under Gen. Thomas's orders, camp commanders found work for fugitive slaves and regulated their contracts, providing wages of at least \$7 a month for men and \$5 a month for women. But on other places, freedmen worked under oppressive conditions. The commander of the Nashville district, General Lovell Rousseau, disliked free-labor arrangements and ignored the breaking of contracts and violence against freedmen, thereby undermining the efforts of his peers, such as John Eaton. And Rousseau was not unique. Freedmen learned quickly that they needed the Union army's help in securing their wages and living conditions. For some, freedom remained elusive; life was similar to slavery—at least during the war.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Maslowski, Treason Must Be Made Odious, 99; Gerteis, From Contraband to Freedmen, 121-26.

<sup>70</sup> Berlin, Genesis of Free Labor, 380-84, 430-33.

When the contraband camps closed, freed children faced a precarious situation. Parents worried about where their children might attend school. They further worried about finding work for themselves and providing for their children. Some Freedmen's Bureau agents and Northern missionaries also worried about such things. In Nashville, camp commanders predicted tough times for the freedmen. Upon the closing of the Clarksville camp, one of the best in Tennessee, R. E. Farwell saw women with "blinding tears" that "filled their eyes and coursed down their cheeks." He feared that the loss of government protection would drive these "tender women," some of whom had "scarred and mutilated backs," back "into cruel bondage" along with their children, and he wondered whether the Bureau should have closed the camps.<sup>71</sup>

Would the children, the first free generation of African Americans, be forced back into slavery? Although not idyllic, a genuine childhood had been experienced by slave children—thanks to the efforts of slave parents in sustaining family bonds. But after all the tumultuous change, violence, and suffering that children experienced and witnessed

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<sup>71</sup> R. E. Farwell to C. B. Fisk, 16 Oct. 1865, Selected Records of the Tennessee Field Office of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872, r. 26, hereinafter cited as SRTFO, National Archives, Washington, D. C. (microfilm); Contract, Francis Fentress, Balaam Fentress, 27 Dec. 1865, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Tennessee Bureau Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, r. 20, hereinafter cited as RACTN, National Archives, Washington, D. C. (microfilm); R. E. Farwell to C. B. Fisk, 10 Aug. 1865, r. 26, SRTFO.

during the Civil War, they surely wondered what the future held for them. In this new time of freedom, as in the days of bondage, children were the most vulnerable people. They were, moreover, about to be caught in conflict among whites that would strongly influence their future.

## CHAPTER II

### THE WAR CONTINUED: THE BATTLE OF IDEAS IN RECONSTRUCTION TENNESSEE

After the Civil War, Tennessee's black children still lived in a turbulent and dangerous place. In March 1862, after the Union army occupied Nashville, the civil government of Tennessee was dissolved, and the state was placed under the control of the Union military. Appointed military governor on March 3, 1862, Andrew Johnson worked unsuccessfully for almost three years to restore civil government. Convening in January 1865, Unionist delegates finally reestablished civil government, and with the war's end in April things seemed to be calming down in the spring of 1865. But another storm was looming. Debates raged among Unionists in the succeeding years over how to reenter the Union and what to do about the freedmen and the former Confederates. Meanwhile, across the state, ex-Confederates reacted with outrage, demanding that their political rights be restored, refusing to cooperate with Unionists, Northern missionaries, and Freedmen's Bureau agents, and endeavoring to maintain white supremacy. Freedmen were at the center of this struggle over the reconstruction of Tennessee's government, society, and economy.

In Reconstruction Tennessee there were four major political groups besides the freedmen: Humanitarian Radicals, Brownlow Radicals, Conservative Unionists, and ex-Confederates. Humanitarian Radicals were devoted nationalists who also affirmed the equality of mankind. They believed that it was the duty of the federal government to protect freedmen's inalienable rights, and that it was their personal civic and religious



duty to provide freedmen with the necessary knowledge and opportunities for moral and social uplift. Like the Humanitarian Radicals, Brownlow Radicals pledged undying allegiance to an indivisible Union, and they denied political rights to ex-Confederates. Unlike the Humanitarian Radicals, however, Brownlow Radicals were not paternalistic reformers. They endorsed black suffrage and other rights for political purposes, to bolster their power. Conservative Unionists disagreed with Brownlow Radicals on two key issues: the disfranchisement of ex-Confederates and the enfranchisement of freedmen. They were less vindictive toward former Rebels and were determined that blacks would remain the bottom rail of society. Ex-Confederates, fearful of Northern Radical influence and social revolution and determined to regain political power and keep blacks powerless, comprised the majority of white Tennesseans.<sup>1</sup>

Few of the Humanitarian Radicals were native to Tennessee. In the 1860s, many idealistic Northern men and women traveled South as teachers or teacher-ministers with hopes of helping Southern whites and blacks recover from the devastation of war and

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<sup>1</sup> Paul D. Phillips, "A History of the Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1964); Joe M. Richardson, Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890 (Athens, 1986); James Welch Patton, Unionism and Reconstruction in Tennessee, 1860-1869 (Chapel Hill, 1934; reprint, 1966); Thomas B. Alexander, Political Reconstruction in Tennessee (Nashville, 1950); Allen W. Trelease, The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction (Westport, 1971).

overcome the demoralizing effects of slavery. According to historian Henry Swint, of the 9,503 teachers in postwar Southern freedmen schools, approximately 5,000 came from above the Mason-Dixon line. They sought to inject a “Northern element throughout the South,” winning freedmen to Christ and teaching them skills necessary in a free-labor culture and economy. Many were of New England descent—even those from the Midwest predominantly came from sections settled by New Englanders and generally had grown up in areas imbued with the abolitionist spirit. Of the eighty teachers in Tennessee whose homes Swint was able to identify, very few came from places noted for Southern sympathies: two were from Indiana and two from Illinois. A plurality came from New England (twelve) or from settlements of New Englanders in Ohio (twenty-three). With twelve teachers in Tennessee, Michigan (also heavily settled by New Englanders) likewise made a sizable contribution to freedmen’s education. It is fair to say that most Northern educators in Reconstruction Tennessee believed they were on a humanitarian mission to train freedmen and Southern whites in the “best traditions of New England.”<sup>2</sup>

Tennessee’s Humanitarian Radicals proclaimed their belief in equal rights and their desire to help freedmen. Lauding “the doctrine of Equal Rights,” the editors of the Nashville Daily Press warned that Reconstruction in Tennessee would be incomplete until the rights of freedmen were guaranteed. Across Tennessee, Radicals preached similar messages, reminding audiences that “every man is born into the world with the

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Lee Swint, The Northern Teacher in the South, 1862-1870 (Nashville, 1941; reprint, New York, 1967), 35, 39-40, 175-200.

right to his own life, to personal liberty, and to inherit, earn, own, and hold property.” These rights derived from God, they believed, because all people were created in the image of God irrespective of race. There never would be genuine freedom, they insisted, until all whites considered their black neighbors equal human beings.<sup>3</sup>

To help blacks adjust to the responsibilities of freedom, Humanitarian Radicals endorsed federal government intervention. One was John Eaton, superintendent of contrabands in the Mississippi Valley during the Civil War, editor of the Radical Memphis Post, and the first superintendent of Tennessee public schools (1867-1869), who stressed repeatedly that the national government had an obligation to enforce laws that established equality and helped freedmen acquire a well-balanced character based on Biblical doctrine. Although criticized by some contemporaries for being a “selfish, mercenary office-seeker” and by some historians for being an insincere reformer, Eaton was an earnest advocate of public education for blacks. Without schooling, he insisted, the freedmen could not compete in a free market. His beliefs were exemplified in the masthead of his newspaper, which proclaimed support for “the civil and political equality of all Loyal Men, the security of person and property of all men, free speech, free schools, and a free country.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nashville Daily Press, 8 Jan. 1866; Alphonso A. Hopkins, The Life of Clinton Bowen Fisk (New York, 1888), 104-105.

<sup>4</sup> George R. Bentley, A History of the Freedmen’s Bureau (New York, 1970), 50; Alrutheus Ambush Taylor, The Negro in Tennessee, 1865-1880 (Washington, 1941),

The federal Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands deserves special note for its role in implementing humanitarian policies. It was established by Congress on March 3, 1865 as a temporary agency, and was more commonly known as the Freedmen's Bureau. Although vetoed by President Johnson, the Freedmen's Bureau Bill of 1866 renewed the agency's charter so that it could continue its work among Southern blacks. Headed by O. O. Howard, the agency provided freedmen with many services: schools, hospitals, legal advice, rations, contract negotiation, assistance in relocation, and the assignment of confiscated or abandoned land. Until former Confederate states complied with Reconstruction policies and were restored to the Union, the Bureau also maintained courts to resolve grievances involving freedmen. Despite the wide scope of its work, the Bureau had little financial support from Congress—in part

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169-70; Louis S. Gerteis, From Contraband to Freedman: Federal Policy Toward Southern Blacks, 1861-1865 (Westport, 1973); John Eaton, First Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Tennessee, Ending Thursday, October 7, 1869 (Nashville, 1869), 45, 47, 56, 58, 64, hereinafter cited as First Report; John W. Alvord, Fifth Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, July 1, 1868 (Washington, 1868), 42, hereinafter cited as Fifth SAR; L. B. Eaton to John Eaton, 18 Jan. 1869, John Eaton Papers, Special Collections, University of Tennessee, hereinafter cited as JEP.

because many Congressmen, Southern and Northern, deemed its benevolent work unconstitutional and unnecessary.<sup>5</sup>

Across the South the agency was manned by both army officers and civilians, many of the latter native to the place in which they worked. In 1865, it had a staff of 799 agents, of whom 424 were soldiers; by 1869, it had shrunk to 158 agents. The local agents were the key figures working on behalf of freedmen. According to O. O. Howard, an agent was a “magistrate with extraordinary power—overseer of the poor of all classes in his district, agent to take charge of abandoned lands, and required to settle, in a few days, most intricate questions with reference to labor, [and] political economy.” The wide scope of their mission and the large amount of paperwork undoubtedly prevented many from being of much assistance to freedmen. One agent, for example, in a ten-month period traveled 5,760 miles, wrote approximately 1,500 letters and reports, delivered 45 lectures, and inspected 50 schools, not to mention dispensing advice to freedmen.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bentley, Freedmen’s Bureau; Barry A. Crouch and Larry Madaras, “Reconstructing Black Families: Perspectives from the Texas Freedmen’s Bureau Records,” Prologue 18 (1986): 109-22.

<sup>6</sup> Bentley, Freedmen’s Bureau, 136; John William DeForest, A Union Officer in the Reconstruction (New Haven, 1948; reprint, Baton Rouge, 1976) eds. James H. Croushore and David Morris Potter, 75-76.

The Tennessee branch was manned at the county level by many native Tennesseans who typically did not subscribe to the Humanitarian Radicalism of their national and state directors. General Howard, national superintendent of the Bureau, was a devout Northern man, evincing what has been described as a “general attitude of Puritan morality,” and was sympathetic to reform. Determined to use his national prominence to secure genuine freedom for blacks, Howard advocated black suffrage, promoted black education, and encouraged black property ownership. Tennessee Bureau superintendent Clinton Fisk, also known for his piety, had been reared in a Missouri home where Methodist doctrine and abolitionist principles held sway; as a teen he had been a conductor of the Underground Railroad. Although less active as an abolitionist in adulthood, Fisk remained sympathetic to the plight of blacks and worked tirelessly on behalf of freedmen during his tenure as Tennessee superintendent. In that capacity, he was known particularly for promoting education and Christian principles. At a convention in October 1865, Fisk spoke to hundreds of freedmen about “the gospel of work, the gospel of economy, and the gospel of virtue” and asserted that the combination of black education and the revival of Christianity would ensure the success of what he called a revolutionary upheaval in Southern society and economy.<sup>7</sup>

The Bureau frequently cooperated with Northern missionaries in efforts to help the freedmen. Acting on behalf of the Tennessee Bureau, John Ogden, a missionary,

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<sup>7</sup> Bentley, Freedmen's Bureau, 54, 60, 116, 169; Hopkins, Clinton Bowen Fisk, 109-13; Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 231.

normal school instructor of wide renown, superintendent of freedmen schools in Tennessee in 1865, and later president of Fisk University, asked Reverend John Morgan Walden, Methodist minister and director of the Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, for advice when establishing a Teacher's Home in Tennessee, where teachers could live and provide some 3,500 freedmen with a systematic education. Clinton Fisk, superintendent of the Tennessee Bureau, solicited the aid of the American Missionary Association, which responded by providing money to buy food, clothing, bedding, and schoolbooks and to build houses for Tennessee freedmen. "Really wonderful results," concluded one observer, "had been accomplished through the disinterested efforts of benevolent associations working in connection with the government." The cooperation was so close that the Tennessee Bureau's mission was regarded by some as "evangelical."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ronald E. Butchart, Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875 (Westport, 1980), 107; John Ogden to J. M. Walden, 26 Aug. 1865, American Missionary Association Manuscripts, Tennessee, r. 2, Amistad Research Center, Dillard University, New Orleans, hereinafter cited as AMATN (microfilm); Fifth SAR, 6; Dennis K. McDaniel, John Ogden, Abolitionist and Leader in Southern Education (Philadelphia, 1997), 24-31, 40-41, 62-73. For an example of how the Bureau and religious leaders mobilized their forces to reconstruct another Southern state, see E. Allan Richardson, "Architects of a Benevolent Empire: The Relationship between the American Missionary Association and the Freedmen's Bureau in Virginia,

The efforts of these men, especially in first months of post-war Reconstruction, gave the Bureau its bad reputation among certain Southerners. One issue that caused resentment was the Bureau's initial land policy. If Howard had had his way, freedmen would have occupied the land abandoned by the Confederates and seized by the Federal army during the war (all of which was, by mid-1865, under the control of the Bureau). The general believed, like many other Humanitarian Radicals, that freedom was virtually meaningless without property. Howard's Circular Number 13, issued in July 1865, was nothing less than a revolutionary plan of land redistribution. It ordered the assistant commissioners (i.e., state superintendents) to rent or sell all lands under their control to freedmen. In Tennessee, the loud protestations of ex-Confederates initially were ignored, for Fisk strictly followed Circular 13 and refused to relinquish property to former Rebels, even those pardoned by President Andrew Johnson. Angry with Howard for his Radicalism and for the issuance of circulars without his approval, President Johnson used the case of B. B. Leake, a recently pardoned Tennessee Confederate, to rein in Howard and his subordinates. This landmark decree not only restored the property of Leake but also ordered Bureau officials to take the "same action . . . in all similar cases." President Johnson thus overruled the revolutionary land policy of the Bureau and guaranteed the

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1865-1872," in Paul A. Cimballa and Randall M. Miller, eds., The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations (New York, 1999), 119-39.



return of confiscated property to ex-Confederates. The Circular, however, had done much to establish the Bureau's reputation as an arm of Radicalism.<sup>9</sup>

Although denounced by ex-Confederates as vindictive extremists, Howard and Fisk really wanted only to balance the scales of justice. They were not mean-spirited, nor were they impractical ideologues. Neither wanted to subjugate the ex-Confederates or exalt the blacks; it was to the benefit of freedmen, they believed, to live peaceably with whites and cooperate in economic matters: "Do not fall out now," Fisk advised freedmen, "but join your interests if you can and live and die together." Fisk had confidence that white Southerners—even former slaveholders—could be persuaded to treat freedmen decently: "White men are very much influenced by a man's success in making a good living," he told a crowd of black Nashvillians, "and if you are thrifty and get on well in the world, they cannot help respecting you." Fisk did everything possible, as historian James Patton puts it, to avoid "collisions between the bureau officials and the whites in the state," and in doing so he even earned the respect of some of his political opponents. On hearing that Fisk had been appointed superintendent of the Tennessee Bureau, President Johnson remarked, "Fisk ain't a fool, he won't hang everybody." He was also praised by some opponents for abjuring military despotism, appointing citizens as agents, and encouraging blacks to find agricultural jobs. But things changed for the worse under the leadership of J. R. Lewis, who proved to be less than capable of handling a large bureaucracy. However, the third superintendent of Tennessee, W. P. Carlin, appointed in

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<sup>9</sup> Bentley, Freedmen's Bureau, 89-96.

January 1867, put the state Bureau back in order and like Fisk worked to better the condition of freedmen without angering whites. He removed agents who used their office to promote political agendas while protecting blacks who were threatened by whites or lost their jobs for voting the Radical ticket.<sup>10</sup>

Another important part of Humanitarian Radicalism in Tennessee was the work of Northern missionaries. Like Bureau agents, Northern missionaries, many of them women, made their greatest mark on black education. But missionaries were involved in other matters, too: the distribution of rations, the establishment of orphanages, and the evangelization of Southern society. Sunday school lessons and sermons, they believed, were essential to the success of Reconstruction. Northern missionaries admonished black children and adults to be responsible, work hard, love their country, and fear God.

Northern missionaries believed they had a significant role in Reconstruction. Slavery, they claimed, had kept blacks in a “state of moral degradation,” and many considered the Civil War a “‘purifying act of God,’ a means of both retribution and collective salvation.” Slavery’s death, in the eyes of missionaries, liberated blacks’ bodies and souls and essentially turned freedmen into blank slates, needing to form consciences and learn good morals. Missionaries considered their education and relief

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<sup>10</sup> Hopkins, Clinton Bowen Fisk, 94, 106; Patton, Unionism and Reconstruction, 155, 159-160; Nashville Daily Press and Times, 9 Aug. 1865, 14 Mar. 1867.

work a “benevolent continuation of the war” that would ensure the moral purity of black women, full manhood for black men, and an understanding of Christianity among all.<sup>11</sup>

Not directly involved in politics, Northern missionaries in Tennessee could express an idealistic reformism. While most Bureau officials were pleased with the establishment of a statewide system of public education in 1867, John Ogden was disappointed, believing that the establishment of segregated schools pandered to the prejudices of whites and reinforced racism. What Tennesseans desperately needed, Ogden claimed, was an equitable and integrated school system free of racial and class prejudices, a system that would work to eliminate racial prejudice. “Segregation must die sometime” he proclaimed, “and the sooner the legislature strikes the blow the better. If it hurts somebody, let somebody get out of the way.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jacqueline Jones, Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873 (Chapel Hill, 1980), 14-15; Samuel T. Spear, Two Sermons for the Times: Obedience to the Civil Authority; and the Constitutional Government Against Treason (New York, 1861); Samuel T. Spear, The Nation’s Blessing in Trial: A Sermon Preached in the South Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn by the Past Rev. Samuel T. Spear, D. D., November 27<sup>th</sup>, 1862 (New York, 1862).

<sup>12</sup> Patton, Unionism and Reconstruction, 162; Nashville Daily Press and Times, 15 Nov. 1867.

However, Humanitarian Radicals in Tennessee, missionaries and Bureau agents, also believed that freedmen must reject their supposed life of immorality and develop a discerning conscience. Humanitarian Radicals found in the workplace what they considered improper behavior, for slavery had presumably made blacks apathetic and indolent. Moreover, now that freedmen worked for wages, they might become spendthrifts and end up in a new form of bondage: debt. The blacks must be encouraged to climb from the pit of sinful infidelity and irresponsibility to the high ground of fidelity, hard work, and thrift.<sup>13</sup>

Humanitarian Radicals hoped also to eradicate vice and poverty and prepare blacks for the responsibilities of freedom by promoting family stability. A stable home was the touchstone for all Reconstruction reform, believed missionaries, for the nuclear family inculcated Victorian values necessary in a free-labor economy, including proper

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<sup>13</sup> Second Annual Report of the General Assembly's Committee on Freedmen in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (Pittsburgh, 1867), 7-10, 17, hereinafter cited as Second PCUSA; Jones, Soldiers of Light and Love, 114-15; Third Annual Report of the General Assembly's Committee on Freedmen of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (Pittsburgh, 1868), 13, 19-20, 23, hereinafter cited as Third PCUSA; Fifth SAR, 40-42, 75-76; John W. Alvord, Sixth Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, July I, 1868 (Washington, 1868), 46-48, hereinafter cited as Sixth SAR; C. Stuart McGehee, "E. O. Tade, Freedmen's Education, and the Failure of Reconstruction Tennessee," Tennessee Historical Quarterly 43 (1984): 378, 380.

gender roles, thrift, and temperance. Two-parent families not only provided stable incomes for supporting children but also allowed mothers to stay home and tutor children in the ways of proper society. In the opinion of missionaries, black women too commonly had no husband to provide for their children and therefore were trapped in poverty. What black children needed, they preached, was two-parent families headed by moral, hard-working, thrifty husbands and fathers.<sup>14</sup>

Missionaries also believed that education would erase a multitude of Southern sins. According to John Ogden, who believed that all that blacks needed for success was a fair chance, schools were the “exponents of higher civilization, the stepping stones to right thinking and right living.” Across Tennessee, teachers taught civil and domestic lessons along with the three R’s, including the importance of property ownership and

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<sup>14</sup> T. J. Ellingwood, ed., The Sermons of Henry Ward Beecher: In Plymouth Church, Brooklyn (New York, 1869), 427; G. Grosskopff to C. B. Fisk, 2 Feb. 1866, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Tennessee Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, r. 10, 1866, G-M, mf., National Archives, Washington, D. C., hereinafter cited as RACTN; O. O. Howard, Circular Letter, 2 Mar. 1866, RACTN, r. 10, RLR, G-M; Fifth SAR, 75-76; John Eaton, Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen: Reminiscences of the Civil War with Special Reference to the Work for the Contrabands and Freedmen of the Mississippi Valley (New York, 1907), 240; John W. Alvord, Seventh Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, January 1, 1869 (Washington, 1869), 42, hereinafter cited as Seventh SAR.

marriage and the responsibilities of citizenship. They also banned tobacco and alcohol from schools, and on Sundays missionaries preached against their use at home. For instance, Chattanooga freedmen were told by Ewing O. Tade, a missionary supported by the American Missionary Association, that the sinful pleasure of alcohol and tobacco was fleeting, while debt incurred from a life of hedonism was long-lasting. Liquor, in particular, was denounced as a “demoralizing agent” that could undo moral and social reconstruction. Schooling was essential in making freed children productive and patriotic adults, averred the idealistic missionaries, and with God’s help illuminating instruction would penetrate the cloud of intellectual and moral darkness hovering over the South.<sup>15</sup>

Well before the public school system was established, Northern religious organizations began founding black schools in Tennessee. Charitable support of schools was offered by all major Protestant denominations and non-sectarian freedmen’s aid

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<sup>15</sup> Richardson, Christian Reconstruction, 240-41; Report of John Ogden to Gen. Fisk, 31 Dec. 1865, RACTN, r. 10, RLR, N-S; McGehee, “E. O. Tade,” 373, 380; T. E. Bliss to Rev. M. Strobie [?], 5 July 1866, AMATN, r. 2; John W. Alvord, Third Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, January 1, 1867 (Washington, 1867), 33, hereinafter cited as Third SAR; Paul David Phillips, “Education of Blacks in Tennessee during Reconstruction, 1865-1870,” in Carroll Van West, ed., Trials and Triumph: Essays in Tennessee’s African American History (Knoxville, 2002), 145-67; Butchart, Northern Schools, 193; O. O. Howard, Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard: Major General United States Army, 2 vols. (New York, 1908), 1: 329-30.

agencies; however, Presbyterians led this particular wing of the Lord's army in the "benevolent continuation of war." The United Presbyterian Freedmen's Board of Missions cooperated with the Western Freedmen's Aid Commission (a group that had separated from the secular Contraband Relief Commission of Cincinnati in order to bring a "religious element" to relief efforts) in establishing schools in Knoxville; the Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association established schools in Murfreesboro; the Old School Presbyterian Society established schools in Tullahoma; the Old School Presbyterian Association established schools in Clarksville; the United Presbyterian Missions played a key role in building schools in Nashville; and the American Missionary Association cooperated with the Western Freedmen's Aid Association in establishing schools in Franklin. These and other religious organizations donated liberally to further the education of blacks. Members of the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America donated tens of thousands of dollars annually to the cause. Of the nine schools fully funded by the denomination, two were in Tennessee, one in Clarksville, the other in Columbia.<sup>16</sup>

Brownlow Radicals, unlike the Humanitarian Radicals such as Ogden and Fisk, cared little for the plight of Tennessee freedmen and supported legislation that uplifted the downtrodden only when it benefited their own political cause. From 1865 to 1869, these men controlled Tennessee politics.

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<sup>16</sup> Report of John Ogden to Gen. Fisk, 31 Dec. 1865, RACTN, r. 10, RLR, N-S; Second PCUSA, 35; Third PCUSA, 44.

Brownlow Radicals were mostly East Tennessee Unionists. The most famous was of course the movement's leader and namesake, the Reconstruction governor himself, William G. Brownlow. Jailed by Confederates for his uncompromising Unionism, the Knoxville Methodist minister and newspaper editor, known as the Fighting Parson, became a symbol of loyalist defiance during the war, and his wartime incarceration helped him win the gubernatorial elections of 1865 and 1867. According to historian Alrutheus Taylor, Brownlow had two main goals as governor: to "restore Tennessee to the Union under the control of extreme loyalists and humiliate those whom he considered traitors." In 1866 Brownlow saw his native state restored to the Union, an act that ultimately exempted the state from Congressional Reconstruction. In 1869, the governor resigned to take a seat in the United States Senate. His resignation precipitated the downfall of Radical control in Reconstruction Tennessee and the return of ex-Confederates to political power.<sup>17</sup>

What united Brownlow Radicals was enmity toward ex-Confederates and a determination to withhold the franchise from them. In their eyes, Reconstruction was not a time for leniency, but for punishment; all adult males who had supported the Confederacy must be disfranchised. One Brownlow Radical proclaimed that he was

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<sup>17</sup> E. Merton Coulter, William G. Brownlow: Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands (Chapel Hill, 1937; reprint, Knoxville, 1999); Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 3; Paul H. Bergeron, Stephen V. Ash, and Jeanette Keith, Tennesseans and Their History (Knoxville, 1999), 161-66, 176-79; Alexander, Political Reconstruction, 19-20.



“against all Rebels from Jeff Davis down to the lowest corporal, let them be white, black, ring-streaked or striped, dead or alive.” Anyone who had forsaken the beloved Union, he asserted, “had no right in society.” Another Radical went further: “They [Rebels] ain’t thrashed half enough, give it to them . . . disfranchise them forever. Let their children and their children’s children know of the stain that rests upon their ancestors.”

Brownlow himself declared that secession was a rebellious act, “a crime against law, liberty, and humanity,” and insisted that Confederates had given up their citizenship, and even their right to life, when they seceded.<sup>18</sup>

In June 1865 the Brownlow-dominated state legislature passed a franchise bill. Confederate leaders were disfranchised for fifteen years, while lesser Rebels lost their vote for five. The only way ex-Rebels could vote was if they had taken an oath of allegiance at least a month before General Robert E. Lee’s surrender; of course, few had done so. After the congressional elections of 1865, Brownlow recommended a new law, which was passed in 1866, that disfranchised all ex-Confederates for life.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Alexander, Political Reconstruction, 61; Knoxville Whig, 7 June 1865; G. H. Burger to Col. Houk, 4 Aug. 1866, Leonidas Campbell Houk Papers, McClung Collection, Knoxville, Tennessee, hereinafter cited as Houk Papers; Nashville Daily Press, 10 Aug. 1865.

<sup>19</sup> Nashville Daily Press, 12 Jan. 1865; Bergeron, Tennesseans, 163.

Although they strongly supported emancipation by 1865, Brownlow Radicals were for the most part Negrophobes. From their lips came racist remarks that equaled anything ever uttered by a Confederate. To these men, emancipation did not mean citizenship: slavery should be abolished, but freedmen should never be considered equals. As one remarked at the January 1865 convention, "If there is any body here that loved niggers better than his country, he should not be here." Another convention attendee asked: "Will the people of Tennessee permit the valueless negro to stand between them and the reestablishment of civil government?" All of Tennessee's problems, this delegate insisted, were due to "the everlasting nigger—that dark fountain from which has flowed all our woes."<sup>20</sup>

Unsurprisingly then, Brownlow Radicals initially resisted granting freedmen the rights of court testimony and suffrage. Horace Maynard opined in a speech to Knoxvilleians in the summer of 1865 that black suffrage was unnecessary, for the loyalists had "done enough for them by freeing them." He vowed to do nothing more for blacks until he was convinced that they had achieved a certain level of enlightenment. Later that year a Radical state legislator pledged to vote against the "infernal" black testimony and suffrage bills, claiming that a vote for the bills was a vote against his white constituency.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Nashville Daily Press, 12 Jan. 1865; Alexander, Political Reconstruction, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Anonymous report, Aug. 1865, and J. M. Melton to Col. Houk, 14 Dec. 1865, Houk Papers.

The fact remains, however, that in 1866 the Radical-dominated legislature granted blacks the right to testify in court and in 1867 enfranchised black men. This was not done from a genuine change of heart, however. Brownlow's public pronouncements claimed that the state had a moral obligation to blacks to pass those laws, but few of his supporters believed him. More compelling were the practical justifications he proffered: the laws would head off federal intervention, make the unwelcome presence of the Freedmen's Bureau unnecessary, and gain sixty to seventy thousand votes for the Radicals.<sup>22</sup>

Opposing Brownlow on these bills were the Conservative Unionists (also labeled simply Conservatives), most of whom called Middle or West Tennessee home. All had been Unionists during the Civil War, and all criticized the Brownlow government during Reconstruction and feared extreme Radicalism.<sup>23</sup>

Sympathetic toward the ex-Confederates, Conservatives believed that Brownlow Radicals were vindictive. With Edmund Cooper leading the attack against the Radical franchise act, Conservatives asked for fairness and "an equilibrium of society," and urged loyalists to let bygones be bygones. More than one Conservative called on the better

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<sup>22</sup> Alexander, Political Reconstruction, 101; Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 23.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander, Political Reconstruction, 40-42, 85-89; Patton, Unionism and Reconstruction, 23-28, 41, 107, 136; Bergeron, Tennesseans, 161-66, 176-80.

angels of Radicals' nature, claiming that granting suffrage to ex-Confederates would be a Christian act. They also believed that Brownlow's franchise act violated federal law, reasoning that citizens of Tennessee who took an oath of allegiance to the United States (even if they had once been secessionists) were entitled to equal protection and electoral participation. Conservatives also feared that the extremism of the Brownlow government might incur the wrath of the President and Congress and jeopardize the restoration of Tennessee to the Union. Furthermore, Conservatives interpreted the Radical franchise act as waving the bloody shirt, a vengeful, shameful ploy by the ambitious to gain office.<sup>24</sup>

The strident racism of some Conservative Unionists led them also to oppose Brownlow's enfranchisement of freedmen. Like most other mid-nineteenth-century white Americans, Conservatives deemed blacks incapable of exercising the rights and privileges of citizenship responsibly. They saw no point in allowing blacks to vote, hold office, or give testimony, and thus criticized Humanitarian Radicals for giving freedmen false hopes and black leaders for chasing "strange Gods." Many doubted whether freedmen could acquire the acumen needed for such a responsibility; one even stated that "South American monkeys" were more capable than freedmen of voting responsibly.

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<sup>24</sup> B. Manard to T. A. R. Nelson, 28 June 1865, Thomas A. R. Nelson Papers, McClung Collection, Knoxville, Tennessee, hereinafter cited as Nelson Papers; Nashville Daily Press, 12 Jan., 12 Apr., 25 May, 1865; Nashville Dispatch, 1 July 1865; Patton, Unionism and Reconstruction, 95, 99, 108, 113, 124.

The result of giving blacks the franchise, averred Conservatives, would be nothing less than chaos. It would lead freedmen to focus on abstractions—such as freedom and equality—instead of working and providing for their families. Many Conservatives furthermore perceived the black suffrage act, along with the federal Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Tennessee freedmen testimony bill, as a harbinger of “forced equality with an inferior and degraded race.” “We will not see our race degraded,” one warned, “to an equality with [the freedman].” The fear of equality caused many Conservatives also to protest the work of Freedmen’s Bureau agents.<sup>25</sup>

In the wake of the passage of the black franchise bill in February 1867, however, some Conservatives bowed to the inevitable and began to reconsider their opposition to black voting. The crafty among them, such as Edmund Cooper and A. S. Colyar, realized the potential to siphon black votes from the Radicals. With such a strategy, the editor of the Lebanon Herald anticipated Conservative success: “If the proper steps are taken, the great bulk of negro votes can be turned against the radicals.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Nashville Dispatch, 4 July, 8 Aug. 1865; Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 22, 45; Patton, Unionism and Reconstruction, 134, 159-60; W. B. Carter to T. A. R. Nelson, 19 Jan. 1864, James W. Aumes et. al., to T. A. R. Nelson, 6 Oct. 1867, Nelson Papers; Memphis Appeal, 26 Feb. 1867.

<sup>26</sup> Nashville Daily Press and Times, 21 Oct. 1865, 11 Mar. 1867; Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 21-22, 45-47; Patton, Unionism and Reconstruction, 134-35.

Conservatives included blacks in their county and state conventions of 1867 and there endorsed civil and political equality. At the Davidson County meeting, thirty of the approximately 150 attendees were black, and at the state convention, nineteen black delegates were present. At the state convention blacks from across Tennessee gave speeches. At a local convention, Edmund Cooper confirmed that he now accepted the legal rights of blacks and considered them political equals, deserving to be called constituents. Others vowed to protect and secure the rights of freedmen. Delegates to the state convention approved the following resolution: "That our colored fellow-citizens of the United States and of the State of Tennessee and voters of this State, are entitled to all the rights and privileges of citizens under the laws and constitution of the United States and of the State of Tennessee."<sup>27</sup>

But Conservative Unionists found it difficult to distance themselves from a history of Negrophobia and garner black support. They had no legacy of humanitarianism and competed with Brownlow Radicals, who had introduced legislation benefiting freedmen. It mattered not that Brownlow Radicals supported the black franchise for practical purposes. What mattered was that Brownlow Radicals had given freedmen suffrage and that Conservative lawyers challenged the constitutionality of black suffrage only three weeks prior to the state convention. Conservatives failed to convince freedmen that they had had a genuine conversion. Blacks noted especially the nomination of Emerson Etheridge as the Conservative gubernatorial candidate. A former

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<sup>27</sup> Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 47, 49-52.

slaveholder and critic of President Lincoln, Etheridge made few black allies.

Furthermore, three days before his nomination, he publicly confessed that, if he had his way, blacks would still be slaves. On election day in August 1867, unconvinced that Conservatives represented their best interest, freedmen overwhelmingly voted the Radical ticket: Brownlow received 74,034 votes and Etheridge only 22,550, and the Radicals secured an overwhelming majority in the General Assembly.<sup>28</sup>

Angered by the election results, the granting of more privileges to freedmen, and the continued disfranchisement of ex-Confederates, Conservatives sought another route to political victory. Claiming that the state government had been hijacked by Brownlow and his cronies, who had duped their constituency, Conservatives pledged to take the government back from what one editor described as the “uninformed, non-reading whites of the mountains” and the “ignorant and superstitious Africans of Middle and West Tennessee.” While some Conservatives still tried to win the black vote, most resorted to allying with ex-Confederates and discouraging blacks from voting. An omen for Tennessee freedmen was the Conservative Unionists’ alliance with the Democratic party and its nomination of former Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest as delegate-at-large to the national Democratic convention of 1868.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Nashville Daily Press and Times, 19 Apr. 1867; Patton, Unionism and Reconstruction, 136-37; Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 51, 62-63.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 56; Paris Weekly Intelligencer, 12 Aug. 1867.

Forrest's presence foreshadowed the imminent return of Confederate power. Ex-Confederates burned with rage at Radical domination, Rebel disfranchisement, and black enfranchisement; hoping their franchise would one day be restored, they formed political alliances with Conservative Unionists. Many were willing to use violence and intimidation to get their way. The infamous Ku Klux Klan grew out of the ex-Confederates' frustration with the political situation in Tennessee, and among its leaders were some outstanding Confederate officers. One was Nathan Bedford Forrest, the cavalry general who had wreaked havoc among federal troops; he became the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Another was John C. Brown, a former Confederate general and eventual governor of Tennessee.

The political discontent of ex-Confederates kept racial tensions in Tennessee high. Bureau agents reported that some places were on the brink of racial war; W. P. Carlin predicted not only the shedding of blood but also the burning of houses and crops and barbaric acts of rape and plunder. In Clarksville, whites evinced a spirit of violence, contempt for the law, and a determination to undo Reconstruction. "Almost nightly there are outrages" in Williamson and Giles counties, an army officer commented in 1868, some of which were never reported by freedmen for "fear of worse ones being enacted."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Freedmen's Affairs in Kentucky and Tennessee. Letter from the Secretary of War, Transmitting, in Compliance with House Resolution of the 1<sup>st</sup> Instant, Report of Brevet Major General Carlin, for the Last Six Months, Relative to the Condition of Freedmen's



Some whites intimidated freedmen into submissiveness. Walking down the street, black men were accosted by whites, commonly under the influence of liquor and hatred, and asked how they cast their vote in the last election. A wrong response, or no response, could result in violence: a stone hit one black man accused of voting for Brownlow, and another Brownlow supporter was struck by a chair. One victim was practically disemboweled. In rural areas, violence was even more prevalent. Knowing that some blacks paid the price of death for voting Radical, many Brownlow supporters hid out until white tempers cooled. One drunken ex-Confederate threatened to kill a freedman simply because his skin was black; another shot a freedmen for not stopping when told to do so.<sup>31</sup>

With racial tensions so high, a small incident between a white and a black could unleash mob violence. The most infamous riot in Reconstruction Tennessee occurred in Memphis on May 1-3, 1866. Bureau officials concluded that its cause was a pervasive bitterness between whites and blacks. Following a scuffle between a few police officers and blacks, city authorities urged whites to arm themselves and kill or drive out as many

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Affairs in Kentucky and Tennessee (Washington, 1868), 40, 46, 49-50, hereinafter cited as Freedmen's Affairs.

<sup>31</sup> Phillips, "Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee," 320; Nashville Daily Press and Times, 14 Mar., 7 Aug. 1867, 3 Sept. 1868; S. H. Melcher to J. T. Alden, 17 Jan. 1866, [www.freedmensbureau.com/Tennessee/reports/lagrange.html](http://www.freedmensbureau.com/Tennessee/reports/lagrange.html).

freedmen as possible in the city. For three days Memphis was “under the control of a lawless mob,” investigators reported, “who committed all crimes imaginable, from simple larceny to rape and murder.” In the end, twelve churches, eight schools, and fifty houses in the black community lay in ashes. The Bureau estimated that forty-six blacks died and seventy were injured.<sup>32</sup>

The organized crime of the Ku Klux Klan, however, was the biggest threat to the security of freedmen. The Klan was formed in Pulaski in 1865 by former Rebels as a “form of amusement.” Thereafter it grew exponentially and became a terrorist organization. Its preferred tactic was nightriding in bands of anywhere from six to sixty men, and its preferred targets were Radical blacks. Mounted, disguised, and armed, Klansmen dragged freedmen from their homes, threatened them and their families, and sometimes burned their houses and the schoolhouses of their children. A more gruesome tactic was leaving victims riddled with bullets or swinging from the nearest tree. According to a missionary, “No Union man, black or white,” was safe at night—not even at church.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Phillips, “Freedmen’s Bureau in Tennessee,” 280-92; Charles F. Jackson and T. W. Gilbreth to O. O. Howard, 22 May 1866, [www.freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/outrages/memphisriot.html](http://www.freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/outrages/memphisriot.html).

<sup>33</sup> Alexander, Political Reconstruction, 178-98; Patton, Unionism and Reconstruction, 160, 163, 170-75; Trelease, White Terror, 3-27, 58-59; Nashville Daily Press and Times, 14 Mar., 7 Aug. 1867.

The Klan targeted not only freedmen but also white Radical politicians and Humanitarian Radicals. On more than a few occasions, Klansmen targeted Bureau agents, some of whom who lived in fear for their lives and slept with a revolver near at hand. One missionary received a letter from the Klan: "We have determined to rid our community of Negro-loving fanatics. You are one of the number." The Klan had its eye on native Radicals, too. Men such as Sheriff J. S. Webb of Rutherford County were harassed and threatened, and some were driven out of town. Still others were murdered. In Fayetteville, the Klan killed sixty-five-year-old state senator William Wyett.<sup>34</sup>

The intimidation of the Klan and other terrorist groups kept many freedmen from the polls, and with each absent freedman, Brownlow and his allies were one step closer to being voted out of office. Worried that the state government might be overthrown, Brownlow Radicals passed legislation in 1868 that made Klan members, their accomplices, and anyone unwilling to testify against the group a criminal, subject to at least five years in prison and a five-hundred-dollar fine. Moreover, Governor Brownlow declared martial law and deployed the Tennessee State Guard in various parts of Middle and West Tennessee in 1867 and 1869 to stamp out Klan violence. After Brownlow resigned in 1869, however, Governor DeWitt Clinton Senter demobilized the State Guard

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<sup>34</sup> Bergeron, Tennesseans, 173; Trelease, White Terror, 35.

and, as one historian puts it, “with its arch-enemy departed, the Ku Klux Klan gradually disappeared from the state.”<sup>35</sup>

The majority of ex-Confederates and those sympathetic to them did not physically harm freedmen, but they hated Reconstruction policies that, as they claimed, perverted the natural order. According to one editor, the idea of social equality was “a humbug and an impossibility.” Many others agreed, believing God had created blacks inferior, to be forever the humble servants of their white superiors; they were the bottom rung in the hierarchy. One ex-Confederate angrily exclaimed: “Tennesseans were not born of slaves! [They] can never be ruled by them!”<sup>36</sup>

Believing freedmen to be incorrigibly irresponsible and mere pawns of the Radical leadership, ex-Confederates bristled at the news of blacks voting Radical, running for local office, and negotiating theretofore unimaginable deals with their employers, and bitterly opposed any measure that challenged white supremacy. Conservative newspaper editors intensified this resentment by publishing incendiary articles that maligned the Bureau and inspired whites to break contracts with freedmen.

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<sup>35</sup> Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 91, 93, 96; Nashville Daily Press and Times, 20, 31 Aug. 1868; Patton, Unionism and Reconstruction, 193-200.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen V. Ash, Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870: War and Peace in the Upper South (Baton Rouge, 1988), 193; LeRoy P. Graf, Ralph W. Haskins, and Paul H. Bergeron, eds., The Papers of Andrew Johnson, 16 vols. (Knoxville, 1967-2000), 14: 553-54.

Some employers fired Radical blacks. Selective enforcement of vagrancy laws was one way that ex-Confederates undermined Reconstruction legislation and kept blacks in their supposed place. Nashville police, for instance, cracked down on vagrants, but largely arrested blacks and ignored whites; authorities soon transported child vagrants to Mississippi to work on cotton plantations. Some ex-Confederates wanted the black menace banished altogether from Tennessee: "The best thing on earth that could be done for the South," remarked one white Tennessean, was to remove "the last vestige of the negro."<sup>37</sup>

The end of slavery, however, did not entirely demolish the paternalistic ethos of white Southerners. Religious whites endeavored to teach freedmen and "to Christianize them, and make them an element of safety and a blessing to us," for they sincerely believed that ignorant freedmen, influenced by the liberal scriptural interpretations of Northern missionaries, might unravel the whole fabric of Southern society. Some ex-Confederates continued to provide for indigent ex-slaves on their farms. Many argued

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<sup>37</sup> Patton, Unionism and Reconstruction, 160, 163, 170-75; Freedmen's Affairs, 29; Phillips, Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee, 288-90; Howard N. Rabinowitz, Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890 (New York, 1978), 35-36, 46-47; Graf, Papers of Andrew Johnson, 11: 380-81, 14: 512-13.

against the necessity of the Bureau by claiming that whites “would take care of the negroes.”<sup>38</sup>

The years from 1865 to 1870 were an opportunity for Tennessee blacks to gain independence and political and social equality. They wanted to be considered American citizens, in every sense of the word, but even their political allies limited the realization of this dream. Along with the Humanitarian Radicals, freedmen believed that all men “descended from God, who is the common Father of all, and who bestowed on all races and tribes the priceless right of freedom.” Now that the shackles of slavery had been broken, and even if no other Tennessean did so, freedmen considered themselves Americans, “American citizens of African descent,” as one put it. Black leaders claimed that freedmen had always been “part and parcel of the American Republic,” and they argued that blacks should now enjoy full citizenship since many had sacrificed their lives in the war for the “permanency of the nation.” Asserting the right to assemble, debate, and question the current political doctrines, black leaders across the state met in Nashville in August of 1865 and 1866 to petition Governor Brownlow and President Johnson for the franchise. Initially the Brownlow government recognized certain rights of blacks, but not voting, office holding, or the right to a trial by jury; however, freedmen continued petitioning the state government until they got what they wanted. Seeking more rights than Tennessee politicians were prepared to grant, some black Tennesseans established

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<sup>38</sup> Albert Wardin, Tennessee Baptists: A Comprehensive History (Brentwood, 1999), 276; Graf, Papers of Andrew Johnson, 9: 417-18.

an organization intended to usher in a genuine social revolution: the Equal Rights League. Many black leaders criticized the insincerity and half-hearted measures of Brownlow Radicals. Randall Brown of Nashville remarked that Brownlow “has been a governor a long time and has never put a colored man in office.” He later disparaged a Radical judge for not allowing a single black juror in his courtroom. Many no doubt concluded with Brown that what little had been accomplished for blacks in Tennessee was the work of Humanitarian Radicals, for “Home Radicals may be good men. But . . . it is in the blood of a Southern man not to mix with the Negro.”<sup>39</sup>

Even when the federal government failed to respond as they hoped it would, freedmen remained patriotic advocates of national sovereignty. The delegates to the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Tennessee denounced secession as “iniquitous rebellion” and claimed that the state’s denial of full rights to blacks amounted to insubordination to the national government. The war had decided once and for all what entity had utmost authority: “Tennessee, proud and noble as she is,” said the Reverend James Lynch to an assembly of Tennessee’s black leaders, “has a master and that master is the United States.” Tennessee freedmen were grateful for the federal

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<sup>39</sup> “Andrew Tait, et al. to the Union Convention of Tennessee Assembled in the Capitol of Nashville, January 9, 1865,”

[www.inform.umd.edu/ARHU/Depts/History/Freedman/tenncon.html](http://www.inform.umd.edu/ARHU/Depts/History/Freedman/tenncon.html), hereinafter cited as “Andrew Tait to the Union Convention”; Patton, Unionism and Reconstruction, 135; Nashville Daily Press, 7, 8 12, Aug. 1865; Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 45, 59-60.

government's role in abolishing slavery and took every opportunity to display patriotism and give thanks. The Colored Convention of 1866 established January 1, the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, as a day to celebrate freedom. The delegates also voted to make the anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's death a time to remember the late President, "the Martyr and the Liberator," and to pray for freedmen across the nation. When the Tennessee legislature finally gave them suffrage, elated blacks celebrated with patriotic displays. Jonesboro blacks marched around town, waving American flags, singing and playing patriotic music, and shouting their appreciation to God and the United States. Particularly suggestive of the patriotism that resided in the hearts of Tennessee freedmen is the letter sixty black Nashvillians sent to the Union Convention of 1865, in which they pledged to "work, pray, live, and if need be, die . . . for the government of freedom and equality."<sup>40</sup>

In Tennessee, many black leaders sincerely believed that the United States government was great because it was founded on Christian principles. American democracy, they claimed, was based on the principles of equal rights, love of all men, and

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<sup>40</sup> Nashville Daily Press, 8, 9 Aug. 1865; Nashville Daily Press and Times, 9 Apr. 1867; Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 53; "Andrew Tait to the Union Convention"; Proceedings of the State Convention of Colored Men of the State of Tennessee, Held at Nashville, Tenn., August 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup>, 1865: With the Addresses of the Convention to the White Loyal Citizens of Tennessee and the Colored Citizens of Tennessee (Nashville, 1865), hereinafter cited as Proceedings.



justice. These principles derived from Biblical teaching, which prescribed “the same rules of action for all members of the human family.” Blacks rejoiced to live in a “land of Universal freedom” that had finally broken the shackles of bondage. Justice and equal rights were only visions, insisted Tennessee freedmen, unless Americans abided by Christian doctrine: “Happy is that nation,” stated black leaders, “which makes the Bible its rule of action, and obeys principle, not prejudice.”<sup>41</sup>

With the power of suffrage, blacks became, according to historian Alrutheus Ambush Taylor, “a potent force in politics.” The freedmen for the most part stood firmly with Brownlow’s party and ignored the solicitations of the Conservative Unionists, whom they regarded as no better than Rebels. In Chattanooga, freedman Thomas King emphasized that the Radical party alone had granted blacks the right to vote, make contracts, and testify in court, and urged his fellow freedmen to support that party alone. At a meeting in Nashville Abraham Smith said it more plainly: “The Radicals fought for four years to free you, and the Rebels fought four to enslave you. All the Radicals in the Tennessee legislature voted to give you the right of suffrage and the Rebels voted against it. To vote for a Conservative is to vote for the chains of slavery to be riveted on your necks.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> “Andrew Tait to the Union Convention”; Proceedings.

<sup>42</sup> Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 48-49, 53-54; “Andrew Tait to the Union Convention”; Nashville Daily Press and Times, 8, 12, 14, Aug. 1867.

Before and after gaining the vote, freedmen depended greatly on the Freedmen's Bureau. The agency did more than protect freedmen from violence. In Bureau courts, freedmen found justice unavailable in other courts. Bureau agents regulated labor contracts, ensuring that freedmen received compensation for their work and were well-treated. The Bureau also distributed rations to the destitute and provided advice on all sorts of matters. Moreover, the Bureau found employment for blacks and frequently transported them to their new jobs. What is more, the Bureau assisted families searching for lost relatives and procured responsible guardians for the orphaned.

Blacks particularly appreciated the Bureau's educational efforts. They deeply respected the first superintendent of the Tennessee Bureau, Clinton B. Fisk, for making black education a priority, and they shared his enthusiasm. The Reverend Daniel Watkins, for one, delivered lengthy speeches stressing the possibilities that education offered freedmen. He and other black leaders thought that a freedman needed an education to become, as one put it, a "better member of society, and less liable to transgress laws." But common blacks needed no encouragement to acquire an education, for they had an insatiable desire to get what had long been denied them. According to J. R. Lewis, "The interest manifested by [freedmen] is something wonderful." The freedmen of Williamson and Giles counties were among those of whom Lewis spoke; they sent delegates to the Colored Conventions to ask for help in establishing schools. Freedmen elsewhere were just as desirous of an education. Approximately 9,000 freedmen filled the forty-two Tennessee schools run by the Bureau in 1866. Other

freedmen established and maintained their own schools and asked the Bureau only for protection.<sup>43</sup>

At times freedmen were disappointed with the Bureau. Some destitute blacks had come to rely on the Bureau for rations during the chaotic months just after the war and during the drought of 1866 and the harsh winter of 1866-67. But in 1866 Fisk announced that the Bureau would stop issuing rations except in extreme cases, and in 1867 most agents no longer distributed rations “under any circumstances”—except to the infirm and orphaned. Even in the establishment of schools, some freedmen were let down. After their schoolhouse burned in 1865, Winchester blacks requested Bureau aid to rebuild the schoolhouse and purchase new supplies. Their request went unanswered, and as one missionary observed, the freedmen were “much disappointed.” So deep was their disappointment that Fisk felt it necessary to travel to Winchester to reassure them that the agency was indeed there to help them build schools.<sup>44</sup>

For blacks, freedom meant not only educational opportunity and the ballot but also freedom from white control. During and after the Civil War, many blacks migrated to the towns looking for work, education, and a new start. In fact, according to Bureau

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<sup>43</sup> Nashville Daily Press, 7, 9, 10 Aug. 1865; Proceedings; “Andrew Tait to the Union Convention”; Third SAR, 11, 18, 33, 40-41; Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 172.

<sup>44</sup> Nashville Daily Press and Times, 9 Aug. 1867; John N. Schultz to Rev. J. Ogden, 28 Sept., 5 Oct. 1865, AMATN, r. 1.

superintendents Fisk and Carlin, too many came. Nashville was “overstocked with negroes,” Fisk said, and he told the freedmen that it was to their advantage to return to the rural areas. For many the luster of the towns proved to be only the reflection of fool’s gold. In Nashville and other urban areas they encountered terrible overcrowding and disease. But they were still drawn by the opportunities in the towns, and some made a go of it. Those with skills had an easier time: many made a living as blacksmiths, masons, or carpenters. Some opened businesses in the black sections of towns.<sup>45</sup>

Black church-goers seized the chance to separate from white churches, form their own, and offer leadership positions to black men. These new, independent churches became the centers of freedmen’s religious, social, and even political life. Black Protestants from all denominations formed independent churches, but the Baptists (who claimed the largest number of religious African Americans) provide the best example of this post-war phenomenon. The blacks of the First Baptist Church of Nashville separated from the white congregation during the war and in March 1865 asked their white brethren to honor their “separate and Independent church,” the First Colored Baptist Church of Nashville. In 1866 the freedmen formed the First Baptist Church of East Nashville, and by December 1867 the blacks of Nashville Baptist Church finally convinced the white congregation to grant their religious independence. Such independent churches sprang up everywhere in Tennessee; as one Bureau agent noted, “every town and rural community had its own.” As the number of black churches grew, freedmen established separate

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<sup>45</sup> Nashville Dispatch, 12 Aug. 1865; Nashville Daily Press and Times, 10 Aug. 1867.

“colored” state associations, such as the General Missionary Baptist Association of Tennessee. African American Baptists also established local associations, including the Stone’s River, Cumberland River, Duck River, Elk River, Richland Creek, and Colored United Baptist of Tennessee associations.<sup>46</sup>

Black preachers had great influence with their congregations. From the pulpits of their churches, freedmen heard sermons that not only explained the heavenly purposes for earthly trials and temptations but also endorsed education and political activity. Some preachers achieved distinction well beyond the confines of their own church. One was Nelson Merry of Nashville. When he died thousands attended his funeral, for he was considered a man of “exalted character, wisdom, and prudence,” worthy of “emulation and praise” by blacks of every denomination.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas. O. Fuller, History of the Negro Baptists of Tennessee (Memphis, 1936), 78-80; Atticus G. Haygood, Our Brother in Black: His Freedom and His Future (New York, 1889), 222-23; First Baptist Church, Minutes, March 1865, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee, hereinafter cited as SBHLA (microfilm); Baptist Church of Nashville, Primitive (Old School), Minutes, Nov.-Jan. 1866, SBHLA; Wardin, Tennessee Baptists, 265, 268-73; First Colored Baptist State Association of Tennessee Minutes, 1865, SBHLA (microfilm); Nashville Daily Press and Times, 17, 20 Aug. 1867.

<sup>47</sup> Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 220-22; Wardin, Tennessee Baptists, 273-75.

Between church services freedmen worked hard to achieve their dream of economic independence. But whites often placed obstacles in their path. Some employers took advantage of their ignorance and inexperience of wage labor. Whether they made a little or a lot, many freedmen realized the value of capital and opened savings accounts at Freedmen's Banks. But what freedmen wanted more than a remunerative job was land, a place to own, live on, and profit from without being dependent on a white employer. Many hailed the passage of the Southern Homestead Act, which promised up to 80 acres for any freedman who homesteaded western land. Others sought land in Tennessee and hoped Fisk could accomplish his goal of letting blacks claim abandoned and confiscated property. A few actually managed, through hard work, thrift, and luck, to acquire a small piece of real estate. But most remained without property and were trapped in an endless cycle of poverty and debt.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Nashville Daily Press and Times, 8, 12 Aug. 1867; Michael L. Lanza, "'One of the Most Appreciated Labors of the Bureau': The Freedmen's Bureau and the Southern Homestead Act," in Cimbala, Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction, 67-92; United States Department of the Interior, Census Office, Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Tennessee, vol. 11., Grainger, Greene, Grundy, and Hamilton Counties, National Archives, Washington, D. C. (microfilm); Dylan C. Penningroth, The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South (Chapel Hill, 2003), 163-86; Loren Schweninger, "Black Economic Reconstruction in the South," in Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., eds., The Facts of Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of John Hope Franklin (Baton Rouge, 1991), 167-88.

But most important, freedom gave blacks the chance to control and define the black family. Before and during the war, many black husbands and wives had been separated, and so had many black parents and children. After the war they sought desperately to reunify their families, often calling on the Freedmen's Bureau for help. But all too often no one knew the whereabouts of a loved one. Those reunited with kinfolk were elated. But they and all other freedmen embarked on a difficult journey to keep the family intact, for the circumstances of Reconstruction—white antagonism, natural calamities, and economic depression—tested the strength of black family bonds.<sup>49</sup>

The conflict of ideas and goals in postwar Tennessee left no part of the freedmen's life alone. Black children found themselves in the middle of this conflict, and would be deeply affected by its outcome. In their homes and schools and churches, black children watched as the battle lines formed.

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<sup>49</sup> Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877 (New York, 1988), 82-88; Leslie A. Schwalm, A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina (Urbana, 1997), 151-52, 155-56, 242-43, 245; Ash, Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 141; Bergeron, Tennesseans, 167.

## CHAPTER III

### TROUBLE IN THE HOME: BLACK PARENTS AND CHILDREN

The black family survived both the appalling conditions of bondage and the tumultuous transition from slavery to freedom. Overcoming a system in which black family stability was at best considered a secondary goal, slaves had found ways to sustain family and kinship bonds. They had looked forward to the Day of Jubilee, when they could at last enjoy unrestricted mobility, live free from white control, receive compensation for labor, and partake of the cornucopia of opportunities that whites had always hoarded for themselves. Once emancipated, however, blacks realized that freedom presented a new set of problems for the survival of the family. Parents, especially fathers, were now the providers and protectors of children and were burdened with all the responsibilities that those two roles entail. Children were now important to the family economically; their labor could make a difference in the fate of the family unit. Gender roles were now redefined by new laws, and men and women, especially fathers and mothers, had to work out a new relationship. Moreover, the federal government now had significant influence over the black family. Freedom offered children new opportunities, such as education, and a better chance to live a childhood with their family; but like their parents, children found that life in freedom could be as troubling in some



respects as that in slavery.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter explores the lives of children living with parents in nuclear families. Blacks struggled mightily in the postwar years to form and maintain such families, encouraged by Northern missionaries and Freedmen's Bureau agents who deemed the nuclear family the basis of civilization and an essential inculcator of proper values in children. But the black nuclear family and the values it presumably taught were constantly undermined in those years not only by economic depression and unpredictable natural calamities but also by conspiring ex-Confederates, unwitting Northern Radicals, and the freedmen themselves.

Events of the antebellum years and the Civil War had decimated (annihilated in some places) the ranks of the black family. Many families had been separated during the days of slavery and many more had experienced that fate during the war. After the war, the chief concern of many Tennessee freedmen was the reunification of their kinfolk.

The reunions of black families were among the happiest moments of Reconstruction. All across the South, freedmen searched for loved ones: parents looked

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877 (New York, 1988), 82-88; Peter Bardaglio, Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South (Chapel Hill, 1995), 115, 145-46, 148, 150, 157; Noralee Frankel, Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi (Bloomington, 1999), 126-45.

for children, husbands and wives sought each other, and extended families tried to reestablish kinship networks. Reforging family bonds was a daunting task, however: to name only two problems, whites were sometimes reluctant to relinquish control of black children, and long distances and problems of communication prevented many freedmen from knowing their family's whereabouts.<sup>2</sup>

Some black children would never know of the determined efforts of their parents to locate them and reunify the family. Sold in an 1863 Knoxville slave market, at least four children, including Laura and Dallas Young, never saw their fathers and mothers again or knew that their parents unsuccessfully petitioned the Bureau for years for help in searching for them. Wherever they were, the Bureau could not find them. Understandably frustrated and impatient with the lack of response to their petitions, some parents, such as William White, a father of six, traveled to various local and regional Bureau offices in hopes of stirring Bureau agents to expedite the process of finding his missing children.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Foner, Reconstruction, 82-84; Ira Berlin and Leslie Rowland, eds., Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of African-American Kinship in the Civil War Era (New York, 1997), 155-91.

<sup>3</sup> F. M. Hendrick to Nashville Office, 14 Jan. 1867, Fred S. Palmer to Office of the Sub-District of Memphis, 27 Mar. 1867, William White to Office of the Sub-District of Louisville, Kentucky, [?] Jan. 1867, John White to Office of the Sub-District of Nashville, 12 Nov. 1866, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of

Even successful searches could last years, and the waiting was of course agonizing for parents; many no doubt gave up hope and resigned themselves to being forever separated from their children, never to know their fate. But many parents and children had the good fortune of being reunited. Often found in distant places, these children unfortunately were not guaranteed a return trip home; parents frequently had to reimburse the Bureau for all or part of the transportation costs, for Bureau regulations forbade agents to pay for anything transported outside of their jurisdiction. This policy in particular affected a thirteen-year-old girl named Lou, who was found laboring for whites in Mississippi in 1865. The Mississippi Bureau paid only for her train ride to Memphis; once there, she had to stay in an orphanage and wait for her father, now in Iowa, to save enough money to pay for her passage home. But there were exceptions. In 1867 a Macon, Georgia, Bureau agent located a missing Tennessee girl and was able to send her by rail all the way to her family in Middle Tennessee.<sup>4</sup>

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Tennessee Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, r. 5, Endorsements Sent (ES), v. 3, hereinafter cited as RACTN, National Archives, Washington, D. C. (microfilm).

<sup>4</sup> F. W. Palmer to Captain Kendrick, 18 Jan. 1867, J. S. Silby to Office of the Assistant Commissioner of Georgia, 21 Mar. 1867, RACTN, r. 5, ES, v. 3; Nashville Office to Honorable James Wright, 10, 24 Nov. 1865, Selected Records of the Tennessee Field Office of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872, r. 51, hereinafter cited as SRTN, National Archives, Washington, D. C. (microfilm).

Bureaucratic tape sometimes entangled parents searching for children. Some agents shirked their responsibilities or made innocent errors that had serious repercussions. For approximately two years six freed children were separated from John White of Marion County because a Bureau agent had misplaced a petition. Fortunately for the children, their determined father traveled to speak with Bureau officers in Nashville. After months of trying to regain his children, he finally managed to get the Bureau to help him. His petition was found where it probably had been misplaced shortly after he mailed it: the "Dead Letter Office." Such cases, though, were fortunately uncommon.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, the Bureau was very helpful in uniting parents and children, and parents turned to the Bureau for help in great numbers. Its network of local, regional, and state offices across the South provided a search mechanism that no other institution in those years could. In many cases, locating children would have been utterly impossible without Bureau help, for not only could children be hundreds of miles away, they most likely were guarded by whites unwilling to relinquish control of their young laborers. Such children could be rescued if the Bureau was willing to enforce its policies. Among those thus rescued were some working on J. H. McDonald's plantation in West

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<sup>5</sup> W. G. Brownlow to W. P. Carlin, 1 Feb. 1867, Office of the Assistant Commissioner to J. W. Groesbeck, 14 Jan. 1867, Wm. White to Louisville, Kentucky office, [?] Jan. 1867, Nashville office to [?], 12 Nov. 1866, RACTN, r. 5, ES, v. 3.

Tennessee; a Bureau officer threatened to arrest McDonald if he did not “deliver to the custody of the . . . parents or their agents . . . all minor children” in his employ.<sup>6</sup>

While most blacks sought to reunite their separated families, a sizable minority used freedom as an opportunity to leave partners and children and start life anew. Some wives left their husbands to escape domestic abuse. One was the wife of George Washington of Davidson County. Trying to retrieve her, Washington lied to the Bureau, saying she had been abducted by whites. Investigation proved, however, that she had voluntarily left him to escape his frequent rages and violence. Bureau agents concluded that Washington was a “scoundrel and vagrant” and that his wife was better off without him. Some husbands took advantage of freedom to leave their wives, too, and some wives also tried to manipulate Bureau agents. Richard Brooks may have had a relationship with Jeanette Brooks in Memphis from 1863 until 1867, but he swore that he never married her—in law or slave custom. Before coming to Memphis, he said, he had solemnized his vows with Hannah Moore in Little Rock, Arkansas. Now much to the chagrin of Jeanette, he wanted to return to Hannah because his relationship with Jeanette was disappointing: she did not contribute to the couple’s subsistence and “would not even cook him his meals.” Other relationships ended more amicably. In 1865, D. Right and

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<sup>6</sup> J. W. Groesbeck to Samuel Walker, 14 Jan. 1867, RACTN, r. 5, ES, v. 3; Nashville Office to Honorable James Wright, 24 Nov. 1865, Captain [?] to J. H. McDonald, 17 Jan. 1866, SRTN, r. 51, ES.

Sharloty Shelton of Memphis were one of many longtime couples who agreed to separate and start new lives with someone else.<sup>7</sup>

Because freedom gave blacks new choices, many children lived in blended families. Their parents remarried for many reasons, including the death of or separation from a spouse, the opportunity to escape a bad relationship, and the prospect of following a personal dream. In any case, life in a blended family forced children to adjust to new living arrangements, including a new father or mother and, in many cases, new siblings. Some black children were old enough to remember their parents' remarriage or were told that their biological father or mother lived elsewhere, for some referred to their siblings as half-brothers and half-sisters. Remarriage also presented a new problem: the custody of children. Once parents separated, it was undetermined, at least immediately after the war, which parent would have presumptive guardianship of children. For example, at the war's end, Mary Ann Levi's two children from a five-year relationship followed her to start a new life with a different father figure, John Faulk of Memphis; and Patrick

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<sup>7</sup> George Washington to Nashville Office, 1, 2 Feb. 1867, F. M. Kendrick to Little Rock District of F. P. Gross, 3 Sept. 1867, RACTN, r. 5, ES; D. Right and Sharloty Shelton, 19 Aug. 1865, Miscellaneous Records of Various States' Freedmen's Marriage Certificates, 1865-1869, Marriage Records, [www.freedmensbureau.com/Tennessee/marriages](http://www.freedmensbureau.com/Tennessee/marriages), hereinafter cited as Miscellaneous Records of Freedmen's Marriages. All the marriages are listed under the groom's surname.

Featherstone's three children went with him after he annulled his "previous connection" to marry Abbe Jane Journal, also of Memphis.<sup>8</sup>

Much to the satisfaction of Bureau agents, many blacks started new lives in wedlock and formed nuclear living arrangements. Many black children reunited with parents who had recently solemnized their vows. Most black parents wanted a legally legitimated household, and many children no doubt traveled with them to pay the standard one-dollar marriage license fee at the local Bureau agent's office and thereafter witnessed the marriage ceremony. Such ceremonies were numerous in the immediate postwar months, and children must have witnessed many. During September 1865 in Rutherford County, for example, 431 couples legitimated their relationships; in

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<sup>8</sup> Cyrus Kimball and Elizabeth Lowry, 17 Jan. 1865, Henry Knox and Mary Williams, 17 Jan. 1865, John Robinson and Clara Neall, 8 June 1865, Tom Rupert and Dolly Green, 30 Oct. 1864, George Kittell and Lou Ellison, 1 Aug. 1864, John Faulk and Mary Ann Levi, 4 Sept. 1865, Patrick Featherstone and Abbe Jane Journal, 16 Sept. 1865, Miscellaneous Records of Freedmen's Marriages; John R. Mitchell, no. 82, Registers of Signatures of Depositors in Branches of the Freedmen's Savings and Trust Company, 1865-1874, Memphis, r.24, hereinafter cited as Registers of Signatures, Memphis, National Archives, Washington, D. C. (microfilm).

November of that year, ninety-five couples said their wedding vows in Fayetteville; in Nashville, seventeen couples did so in one week of January 1866.<sup>9</sup>

Northern missionaries and Bureau agents claimed that nuclear families helped blacks to rise above the immoral lifestyle developed during slavery and provided a nurturing environment for children. Missionaries taught adult blacks to forsake adultery and formalize their relationships, and to teach their children the same lessons. Clinton B. Fisk, superintendent of the Tennessee Bureau and a pious Methodist, also championed such views: slaves had broken God's laws of marriage, he claimed, and as freedmen they should be "sorry for the past and begin life anew, and on a pure foundation." Some, however, disregarded Fisk's advice and lived in what he considered sin. As a result, in February 1866 he ordered that all black couples be wed and made out-of-wedlock relationships a misdemeanor, subject to fines and imprisonment. In the wake of this

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<sup>9</sup> Fred S. Palmer to H. S. Brown, 13 May 1866, SRTN, r. 38; John Lee and Sarah Wells, 16 Nov. 1867, Edward Kelly and Anny Wordell, 19 Aug. 1868, Milas Polk and Mary Bills, 27 Mar. 1866, Hardeman County, Tennessee, Freedmen's Marriage Records, November 29 1865 – December 31, 1870, Book IV-A; Nashville Daily Press, 27 Jan. 1866; Fayetteville Observer, 7 Dec. 1865; Stephen V. Ash, Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870: War and Peace in the Upper South (Baton Rouge, 1988), 210-11.



edict, missionaries rejoiced at the number of marriages taking place in Tennessee and committed themselves to providing marriage services for freedmen.<sup>10</sup>

Once wed, males became the legal representatives of families in all matters. The man was now the legal head of the household. Family laws and practices of Tennessee paralleled those of Reconstruction Virginia, where, according to historian Elizabeth Regosin, a male was endowed “with new legal and social power over his wife and children, a power that had not existed for any family member under slavery.” In addition, fathers typically chose the family’s surname, which was usually that of their former master, and this name facilitated the practice of passing property from father to sons. The Bureau, in fact, encouraged male property ownership, for it was deemed an inculcator of citizenship. Fathers also became the legal representatives of children. Other

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Regosin, Freedom’s Promise: Ex-Slave Families and Citizenship in the Age of Emancipation (Charlottesville, 2002), 10, 81; L. Maria Child, The Freedmen’s Book (Boston, 1865; reprint, New York, 1968), 222; Clinton B. Fisk, “Circular no. 5,” 26 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 16; C. A. L. Crosby to C. S. Crosby, 1 May 1866, American Missionary Manuscripts, Tennessee, r. 2, hereinafter cited as AMATN, Amistad Research Center, Dillard University, New Orleans (microfilm); First Annual Report of the General Assembly’s Committee on Freedmen, of the Presbyterian Church, in the United States of America (Pittsburgh, 1866), 23, hereinafter cited as First PCUSA; Dickson County Marriage Records, 1865-1881, Special Collections, University of Tennessee.

Reconstruction laws and practices likewise empowered black males as the family head. Labor contracts were made between the employer and the head of the household and generally granted men more remuneration than women, thus securing the male's economic leadership of the family. Moreover, employers generally kept records according to male heads of households. All of these laws and practices taught children a paternal view of family, something quite different from the lessons they had learned as slaves.<sup>11</sup>

Black parents were told from missionaries and Bureau agents that simply forming a nuclear family structure was insufficient; they must teach children good morals and protect them from harm. Parents learned the importance of proper parenthood in Sunday schools and under the tutelage of ministers: "You will be answerable before God," Maria Child told black readers in her textbook, "for the influence you exert over the young souls entrusted to your care." Parenthood was depicted as a divine commission to help children stay on the path of righteousness. Parents were admonished that they could not properly rear children in an environment of "adultery, fornication, [and] incest." Parents further learned that "obedience should always be obtained by the gentlest means possible," for it was better to attract children "to what is right than to drive them from fear from what is wrong." In time, many children were taught gently by their parents that

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<sup>11</sup> Regosin, Freedom's Promise, 54-73, 119, 122; Contract of Former Slaves with Thomas J. Ross (Shelby County), 23 Dec. 1865, SRTN, r. 58; J. R. Lewis to C. B. Fisk, 29 June 1866, SRTN, r. 38.

certain behaviors—disobedience, intemperance, and fornication, for example—were relics of slavery and should be abjured by free people. And, too, many parents enrolled children in schools and took them to church, so that they might mature into virtuous citizens.<sup>12</sup>

In a nuclear family, children depended on their parents, especially their fathers, for protection and provision. Although always willing to assist freedmen, Bureau agents and missionaries were pleased to see black men adapt to the new responsibilities of freedom. Playing the role of the protector, Jourdan Anderson, for instance, wanted written assurance that no one would rape his two “good-looking girls” before signing a work contract with his former master, Colonel Anderson of Big Spring, Tennessee; he would rather be without work than place his children in harm’s way. Agents and missionaries also commended men for working assiduously: “The freedmen,” wrote agent C. B. Davis to Clinton Fisk in 1866, “are supporting their wives and children well.” Southern journalists even heaped praise on freedmen: “Most of the freedmen have made contracts for the present year, and are now at work,” wrote the editors of the Memphis Daily Appeal in 1866. “They have acted well.” Many fathers would not even let their educational aspirations supersede their guardianship role, choosing rather to juggle work and school. But in trying to be the provider, some fathers denied children needed attention. Confused, desperate, and feeling neglected, Ann Matthews rejoiced when her father opened the front door wearing a big smile and carrying two sacks; he had left her

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<sup>12</sup> Child, Freedmen’s Book, 222-25, 267.

with older siblings for two weeks while foraging and bargaining for food. Ann relished the sight of him more than the prospect of a square meal.<sup>13</sup>

The home was also where children learned Christian principles. Many freedmen were devout Protestants and practiced the moral values trumpeted by Northern white missionaries. They taught children the importance of living out their salvation and sowing Gospel seeds not only among freedmen but also in the worldwide field of souls. Children no doubt learned from their parents' examples and had opportunities to practice Christian stewardship. In many homes, parents placed mission boxes in conspicuous places to remind all to help the less fortunate and help pay the cost of fulfilling the Great Commission. Also following their religious parents' example, some children were ardent soul-winners in the black community and convinced some adults of the need of salvation. Children also commonly heard parents discussing religious doctrine and righteous living, among other things, with their local pastor or teacher, who made regular house calls on Saturdays—no doubt reviewing the previous week's Scripture lesson. If their parents could not read the Bible to them, children and their parents typically looked forward to the missionary's visit and listened attentively to his or her reading of the Bible and discussion of the text afterward. All in all, missionaries observed that the majority of blacks appreciated the "sacred truths of the Bible," and that morals in the black

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<sup>13</sup> C. B. Davis to C. B. Fisk, 27 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 17; Memphis Daily Appeal, 20 Jan. 1866; Wm. L. Witcher to AMA headquarters, 24 Apr. 1867, AMATN, r. 2; Andrea Sutcliffe, ed., Mighty Rough Times, I Tell You (Winston-Salem, 2000), 100.

community improved. One missionary commented, “Many of them are truly religious—pious of devotion—prompt in attendance to Church—and living to get to Heaven.”<sup>14</sup>

In the home, children also learned Victorian values that coalesced with nineteenth-century Protestantism—not the least of which was thrift. No doubt pleasing Bureau agents, many black parents taught children to work hard, be frugal in all matters, and plan wisely for the future. Starting in 1865, many parents opened savings accounts with the Freedmen’s Savings and Trust Company, commonly known as the Freedmen’s Bank, and hoped their financial discipline would not only provide an example to their children but also ensure financial independence. Thomas and Martha Randolph of Memphis, for example, were among those who saved money for the benefit of their children. Freedmen commonly had savings accounts of \$400 to \$500, a considerable sum at that time and, depending on the location, perhaps enough money to buy a plot of land where a family could be self-sufficient and children could learn farming.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Missionary Magazine (Aug. 1867), 238-39; E. H. Truman to Samuel Hunt, 28 June 1866, C.A.S. Crosby to AMA Headquarters, 1 May 1866, Wm. Witcher to AMA Headquarters, 24 Apr. 1867, AMATN, r. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Walter L. Fleming, The Freedmen’s Savings Bank: A Chapter in the Economic History of the Negro Race (Chapel Hill, 1927, reprint, 1970), 51, 129-30, 141, 159-62; Thomas and Martha Randolph, no. 377, Julia Song, no. 74, Registers of Signatures, Memphis.

The young deposited their pennies, believing the national government protected their money and trusting what they read in Bank pamphlets and heard at school and church: a savings account was the “surest way to get a start in life.” Most young depositors lived in Memphis, Nashville, or Chattanooga, the locations of the Bank’s branches in Reconstruction Tennessee. In these cities, depositors between the ages of five and twenty accounted for approximately one-half of all savings accounts. Some had joint accounts with their parents, but many—including young ones—were sole depositors. Boys and girls opened individual accounts under the heading “no one to draw but myself”: Willie Calmore, 8, Albert Valentine, 9, Lulu Dickerson, 10, and Willie Crosthmaite, 10, were some of the children in Nashville who did just that. Most young depositors were teenagers, however. No doubt following parental advice, Ned and Scott Anderson of Nashville opened individual savings accounts as well. Other children gave parents access to their earnings: Rueben Norris of Nashville, for one, allowed his mother to draw from his account. No matter their age or what type of account they opened, all of these children applied the lessons of prudence that they learned in the home and church.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Fleming, Freedmen’s Savings Bank, 145-50; Registers of Signatures and Depositors in Branches of the Freedmen’s Savings and Trust Company, 1865-1874, Nashville, r. 25, hereinafter cited as Registers of Signatures, Nashville, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (microfilm); Minutes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Session of the General Missionary Baptist Association of Tennessee, Held at the First Colored Baptist Church, Memphis, August 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 1869 (Memphis, 1869), 10-11.

In the black household, children learned other Victorian values as well. They heard Bureau agents and missionaries and their parents discussing the importance of education and working for a living. By 1869, agents and missionaries were pleased with the improvement of blacks' living conditions and moral sensibilities: there was "marked advancement in the social condition" of freedmen, concluded John W. Alvord, the Bureau's national superintendent of freedmen schools. He was especially delighted to learn from Bureau superintendents that the financial affairs of freedmen had improved across the South. In the homes, children learned that such financial success was possible because of what their nation had done for them. Surely six-year old Abe Lincoln would one day learn that. Other children, younger and older than Abe, looked forward to accompanying their parents to the annual Fourth of July parades. At the 1867 Memphis parade among a crowd of approximately 5,000, children ate barbeque, heard political speeches and readings of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, and saw marching bands playing patriotic tunes in a grand procession of national symbols.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> John W. Alvord, Fifth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, 1 January 1868 (Washington, 1868), 41-42, hereinafter cited as Fifth SAR; John W. Alvord, Eighth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, 1 July 1869 (Washington, 1870), 61, hereinafter cited as Eighth SAR; Contract between Abe Lincoln and G. N. Swinbroad, 6 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 20; Brian Page, "Stand By the Flag: Nationalism and African American Celebrations of the Fourth of July in Memphis, 1866-1867," in Carroll Van West, ed., Trials and Triumph: Essays in Tennessee's African American History (Knoxville, 2002), 186.

But at times children taught their parents Victorian values. Little ones often held great influence over their parents, and agents placed great hope in children to secure moral Reconstruction and prepare the way for a better society. Children exhibited “a wonderful change in their deportment,” remarked one agent in his report to national superintendent of education Alvord. After coming home from school, children often retold civic and scriptural lessons to parents, inspiring them to consider their own beliefs and actions. Seeing a child reading his or her Bible or textbook encouraged many adults to pursue an education. “The children,” one agent observed, “are waking up a general conscience, and guiding the entire population in the ways of virtue.” The young appeared capable indeed of shouldering the burden of moral Reconstruction.<sup>18</sup>

Not all families eagerly adopted Victorian values. They did one thing that particularly disturbed Humanitarian Radicals: drink alcohol. Intemperance was public enemy number one in the eyes of many missionaries, including S. S. Potter in Columbia, who reported disgustedly that “Men drink. Women drink. Children drink.” Bureau agents and missionaries claimed that intemperance undermined all that they had set out to do: children had seen mothers and fathers hitting each other and had gone to bed hungry because their parents preferred liquor to food. Drunkenness was a trap, declared the Humanitarian Radicals; it led freedmen back into bondage. But their depictions of the horrors of alcohol abuse rang hollow in many black communities. Many black children

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<sup>18</sup> Eighth SAR, 61, 63; Fifth SAR, 11-12.



no doubt heard mothers chuckle and saw fathers smirk when Bureau agents distributed O. Howard's temperance pledges. In some places, missionaries could not even depend on the black clergy, some of whom used the pulpit to denounce teetotalers. As a result, many agents and teachers threw up their hands, renounced older freedmen too stubborn to change their supposedly wicked ways, and rededicated their efforts to keep children on the path of righteousness.<sup>19</sup>

More accepting of teetotalism than adults, many children joined youth clubs, such as the Band of Hope, to help missionaries stamp out alcohol use. Members attended meetings with their friends, assumed leadership roles, and received club certificates and ribbons for participating in club activities, recruiting new members, and abstaining from alcohol. At club functions children learned that there were two classes of men: drinkers and non-drinkers. The former allegedly committed 85 percent of crimes and comprised a large portion of the destitute; the latter were the "most noble, patriotic, [and] Christian" element of the nation, enjoyed earthly happiness, and gained assurance of heavenly reward. Northern missionaries convinced their young flock that parents "wedded to

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<sup>19</sup> S. S. Potter to John Ogden, 25 June 1866, AMATN, r.2; John W. Alvord, Ninth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, 1 July 1870 (Washington, 1870), 50, hereinafter cited as Ninth SAR; Acts of Tennessee, Thirty-Fifth General Assembly, 1867-1868 (Nashville, 1868), 78, 87; Memphis Weekly Post, 9 Feb. 1869; John W. DeForest, A Union Officer in the Reconstruction (New Haven, 1948; reprint, Baton Rouge, 1997), 103.

tobacco and whisky” were immoral and needed reform. Armed with facts and fueled by religious zeal, these little ones were the vanguard of temperance. “We cannot make our parents discontinue the use of these things [alcohol and tobacco],” black children in Knoxville proclaimed, “for it has become a habit with them which is hard to break; but we will show them, by our example, how much better boys and girls our pledge has made us.”<sup>20</sup>

One thing that pleased Northern missionaries and Bureau agents was that black children matured in homes with parents of the same race, and the vast majority of parents wanted it no other way. (No doubt this fact pleased Southern whites, too.) Missionaries and agents not only wanted freed children to live in financially stable and godly homes, they also wanted those domiciles to be occupied by black parents. During Reconstruction, the vast majority of black children were indeed reared by black parents. Many or most freedmen opposed interracial coupling and preferred spouses of their own race. Francis Barton vowed to never marry “a light man,” even if it benefited her in some way.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Whig and Rebel Ventilator, 10 Jan. 1866; C. A. S. Crosby to AMA Headquarters, 1 May 1866, AMATN, r.2; Ninth SAR, 50.

<sup>21</sup> Acts of Tennessee, Thirty-Sixth General Assembly, 1869-1870 (Nashville, 1870), 69; Miscellaneous Records of Freedmen’s Marriages; Sutcliffe, Mighty Tough Times, 93. In 1870 the General Assembly outlawed the “intermarriage of whites with Negroes, mulattoes, or persons of mixed blood, descended from a Negro to the third generation.”

Be that as it may, many children were of mixed ancestry and lived with mulatto parents, or with one mulatto and one black parent. Where there were two parents, one mulatto and one black, the mother was typically the lighter one. Yet, if marriage certificates of couples in and near Memphis are representative, mulattoes preferred each other for marriage.<sup>22</sup>

Black children also typically lived in a family where the father was older than the mother. In a random sample of twenty-five black couples in Reconstruction Memphis, only in two instances were the wives older than the husbands, and only in one case were the wife and husband of identical ages. Of the remaining twenty-two couples, approximately a third of the husbands were roughly a decade older than their wives. This was a trend not only in Shelby County but all across the state. It was not uncommon for men in their fifties to marry women in their early twenties.<sup>23</sup>

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Violators risked one to five years of incarceration. Now legally classified as “colored,” mulattoes were forbidden to marry whites but could marry others of mixed ancestry and blacks.

<sup>22</sup> Miscellaneous Records of Freedmen’s Marriages. Twenty-five couples from Shelby County comprised the sample.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid; United States Department of the Interior, Census Office, Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Tennessee, vol. 11, Grainger, Greene, Grundy, and Hamilton

Another important aspect of the black family was the freedmen's reestablishment and even expansion of kinship networks during Reconstruction. According to historian Dylan C. Penningroth, family networks expanded after the Civil War on the basis of property. Freedmen who sought self-sufficiency often needed assistance, and in some cases their extended families provided support. Sometimes an uncle or a cousin assumed a paternalistic role, especially regarding children, purchasing and distributing goods among his family or community. In fact the generosity of freedmen worried some Bureau agents, for the idle among the ex-slaves relied on the charity of the industrious.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout Reconstruction, freedmen tried their best to keep immediate families together. Many parents moved with their children to the towns, looking for employment and educational opportunities; however, others remained and found work in rural areas.

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Counties, hereinafter cited as 1870 Census, Grainger, Greene, Grundy, and Hamilton Counties, National Archives, Washington, D. C. (microfilm).

<sup>24</sup> Dylan C. Penningroth, The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South (Chapel Hill, 2003), 163-86; J. E. Jacobs to Col. M. P. Small, 23, 24 Feb. 1866, Jonathan Henry to C. B. Fisk, 29 May 1866, RACTN, r. 10, RLR, G-M; E. A. Easton to [?], 12 Feb. 1866, AMATN, r. 2; DeForest, Union Officer in Reconstruction, 99; Nancy E. Franks, Miscellaneous Records of Freedmen's Marriages.

Faced with the harsh realities of Reconstruction, African Americans soon realized that achieving a model Victorian family would be difficult. Some did, but it was never easy.

Some parents traveled to Tennessee from other states to keep their families intact. Children from such places as Laurens, South Carolina, and Charlotte, North Carolina, were uprooted entirely from their communities and forced to make new friendships in Tennessee, while others traveled to the state with scores of people from their old community. Although the trips were no doubt stressful for all (and even more so in an uncertain time), at least blacks were reassured that they faced whatever awaited them as a family and that the Bureau would assist them. The Bureau helped migrating families find work, yet in many cases parents exhausted their small savings to relocate.<sup>25</sup>

Taking the advice of the Bureau, following their own inclination, or bowing to necessity, many blacks stayed in rural areas working with white planters. Fisk in particular encouraged freedmen to make contracts and farm with former masters, many of whom sought black laborers and agreed to pay wages. Contractual labor was deemed by agents and parents as the surest way to provide for children. Bureau agents nevertheless refused to set rates of fixed wages, believing labor “must be free to compete with other

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<sup>25</sup> W. Hardin to Nashville Office, 11 Sep. 1867, RACTN, r. 5, RLS, v. 3; “List of Freedmen Contracted by James Bond, Jr., and Copy of Transportation Order Furnished Him,” RACTN, r. 21, hereinafter cited as List of Freedmen Contracted by James Bond, Jr. This fourteen-page contract between Bond and seventy-five freedmen, eighteen of whom were under twelve years of age, contains a wealth of information.

commodities in an open market.” So the daily existence and standard of living among black children rested on parents’ ability to negotiate contracts. The Bureau did pledge to make sure contracts did not deprive freedmen of reasonable compensation and to enforce contracts that both parties deemed satisfactory.<sup>26</sup>

Even blacks encouraged freedmen to remain in rural areas. By 1866 black leaders in Memphis had noticed the consequences of a swelling population: crime, disease, poverty, and racial violence. They believed that too many black Memphians had become liabilities. There was money to be made in rural areas, these leaders asserted, for urban populations always needed hinterlands to provide food and other resources. But the Bureau had difficulty convincing freedmen to take up their hoes once again. Believing that freedmen might listen to other freedmen, the Memphis Bureau, with the approval of Fisk, authorized four black men to draft contracts between white planters and blacks.<sup>27</sup>

Some blacks never had to be convinced that the surest way to remain a family unit and become financially independent was working on farms under contractual regulations.

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Tracy McKenzie, One South or Many?: Plantation Belt and Upcountry in Civil War-era Tennessee (Cambridge, 1994), 126-29; LeRoy P. Graf, Ralph W. Haskins, and Paul H. Bergeron, eds., The Papers of Andrew Johnson, 16 vols. (Knoxville, 1967-2000), 9: 597; Clinton Fisk, Circular 10, RACTN, r. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Special Order 70, Memphis Office, 4 June 1866, RACTN, r. 16.

Many remained on their former master's estates; many of those who left stayed in the same rural community.

Children on the farm were either liabilities or assets for the black family and white employers. Children under age twelve did not generally work and were thus considered a financial burden, so employers resisted provisioning them. To ensure that such children would not starve or freeze, many black parents convinced employers to provide the children with food and clothing and deduct this from the parents' wages. Children twelve or older represented a profit, not only to their white employers but also to their parents. Teenage boys commonly worked in the fields for \$5 a month and provisions while adolescent girls usually performed "all kinds of house work" for the same compensation. Children's wages equaled approximately 40 percent of an adult's wage; if the provisions are also counted, their pay totaled almost 60 percent of an adult's wage. Many families would have experienced destitution if not for the work of children. In Madison County, Jones Greer, Jr. (age fourteen) and his brother Frank (eleven) helped their parents make a living; so too in Madison did Thomas Dunaway's and Burrell Blackman's children.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Contracts of T. J. Fuller, Joseph B. Hennings, Thomas A. Dunnaway, Burrell Blackman, Nancy May, Joseph Croon, Sarah Rushing, and J. Hammerly, in Jonathan Kennon Thompson Smith, Freedmen's Labor Contracts, Madison County, Tennessee 1866-1867 (n.p., 1996); Contract between J. M. Johnson and Charles Davis, 8 Dec. 1865, Contract with J. R. Jones, 15 Dec. 1865, Contract between George Morris and Twelve

Contractual labor taught children many Victorian values. Above all, contracts promoted the stability of the black family. Typically drawn under the father's or husband's name, contracts established males as the heads of the families. Although some mothers worked in the field with their husbands, many children routinely saw their mothers engaged in such domestic tasks as cooking, and cleaning while their fathers farmed. Under contractual obligations, both parents agreed to provide for their children and in some cases had the costs of medical care, food, and clothing deducted from their wages. On some plantations, children rarely saw their parents take a drink of whiskey, for drinking was generally prohibited. In all contracts, laborers pledged to work diligently. Young children learned the value of hard work not only from tending the family garden but also by watching parents and older siblings toiling in the fields from sunup to sundown.<sup>29</sup>

Some experiences of farm children, however, resembled those under slavery. Although a profoundly significant change in certain ways, freedom changed little in the daily routines of many rural freedmen. During the time of the contract, employers required parents and children to remain on the premises. In some cases, freedmen were not allowed to see visitors during work hours. Mothers had little time after giving birth

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Laborers, 20 Dec. 1865, Contract between W. G. Johnston and Eliza Johnston, 9 Jun. 1866, RACTN, r. 21.

<sup>29</sup> List of Freedmen Contracted by James Bond, Jr., RACTN, r. 21.



before starting work again; employers grudgingly gave them a three-week leave to recuperate from childbirth and nurse newborns. Many children performed the same chores in freedom as in slavery, lived in the same house, saw the same black workers, and took orders from the same white man. Young children continued to play and had few obligations, but those above twelve were expected by freedmen and whites alike to work.<sup>30</sup>

In some cases the only thing that changed for blacks was that fines replaced corporal punishment. Instead of being whipped or put in stocks, freedmen in and around Clarksville—at least in the few months after the war—had wages deducted for every offense. Like slaves, they rose early in the morning and started working at the ringing of a bell and toiled until another bell ended the workday. And they were expected to work hard; those who did not could be fined. On some plantations, laborers were forbidden to talk on the job. The value of anything stolen, such as fruit or vegetables, or anything abused, such as livestock or tools, resulted in reduced wages. In some instances, freedmen were fined for impudence or swearing. Such regulations were not only endorsed by Southern whites but in some cases by Bureau agents.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Contract between L. T. Bobbett and Two Laborers, 8 Dec. 1865, Contract of A. W. Bledsoe, 1 Jan. 1866, RACTN, r. 21; Contract between Freedmen and G. W. Newbern, 29 Jan. 1866, RACTN, r. 22; Contract of E. R. Alexander, in Smith, Freedmen's Labor Contracts, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Staunton (VA) Spectator, 26 Sept. 1865.

Life was more difficult for children of sharecropping families, however. Large families typically worked as sharecroppers, for employers were reluctant to hire liabilities. So not only did sharecropping parents have more mouths to feed, they also faced work circumstances that wage laborers did not. Dependent not only on the integrity of their employer but on the gods of weather, sharecroppers suffered heavily during the disastrous crop years of 1866 and 1867. Even with a good harvest, most worked for nothing, accumulating debt throughout the year for food, clothing, and shelter. In many cases white employers ignored contractual sharecropping obligations, refused to pay freedmen, and further trapped blacks in a cycle of debt in which they profited little, if any, even from a good crop. In Marshall, Maury, and Rutherford counties, some planters turned out black sharecroppers immediately after the harvest, and only a fortunate few found attorneys willing to represent them. Few sharecroppers were starving, Bureau agents noted, but most had only enough food to keep “soul and body together.” Many children had only cornbread to eat, and those who had more than one change of clothes were fortunate. In one county, one-fourth of the freedmen were homeless, residing with whoever was willing to take them in. “They [blacks] will never succeed,” reported Captain George E. Judd, sub-assistant commissioner of Pulaski, “until they quit working for part of the crops.” Eventually some parents concluded that sharecropping was a dead end.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> McKenzie, One South or Many?, 122; Freedmen’s Affairs in Kentucky and Tennessee. Letter from the Secretary of War, Transmitting, in Compliance with House

But some black families **did** well even in the worst of circumstances. After the war, many blacks considered property ownership the best means to maintain family bonds. According to historian Robert Tracy McKenzie, Tennessee freedmen were “unequivocal in their desire to own land and homes of their own and envisioned a black community of freeholding farmers largely independent of white interference.” As early as 1865, freedmen purchased land at an impressive rate: Bureau agent S. B. Barr stated that most blacks in Wilson County earned an honest living and that some even had accumulated property. As the years of Reconstruction went by, more and more freedmen across the state **did** so. Children of property holders typically lived with their parents on small tracts of land, ranging from ten to twenty acres; some lived on larger tracts shared with other kinfolk. A random sample of twenty heads of freedmen households in Hamilton County reveals that six out of fifteen owned personal and real property, typically appraised at a couple of hundred dollars; but one owned as much as \$500 worth of property. Of that sample, four men owned their own farms and provided their eleven children places to live where their mothers and fathers labored and their siblings resided. As long as there were good crop years, such as the one in 1870, property-holding parents

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Resolution of the 1<sup>st</sup> Instant, Report of Brevet Major General Carlin, for the Last Six Months, Relative to the Condition of Freedmen’s Affairs in Kentucky and Tennessee (Washington, 1868), 28-30, hereinafter cited as Freedmen’s Affairs.

could adequately provide for their children without the fear of having to apprentice them out to make ends meet.<sup>33</sup>

Although the extent of black property ownership seems modest, historian Loren Schweninger contends that blacks made substantial gains in Reconstruction Tennessee. One of twenty-two rural family heads in Tennessee in 1870 was a black farm owner, with an average of \$709 worth of real property. Land ownership was more pronounced in the cities. In prewar Nashville, for example, the estimated value of blacks' land was \$119,400, but by 1870 it had increased to \$245,300. A look at the statistics for personal and real property of the whole state for 1860 and 1870 is more telling. In 1860, 513 black Tennesseans owned \$638,300 worth of real and personal property, for an average

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<sup>33</sup> McKenzie, One South or Many?, 125; Ninth SAR, 43, 50, 86-87; S. B. Barr to C. B. Fisk, 21 Nov. 1865, RACTN, r. 6, RLR, A-D; Contract among Francis and Balaam Fentress and Levi Cheheir, 27 Dec. 1865, RACTN, r. 20. For more on black property ownership in Reconstruction Tennessee and elsewhere, consult W. E. B. DuBois, ed., The Negro American Family (Cambridge, 1909), 104-107; C. Peter Ripley, et al., eds., Witness For Freedom: African-American Voices on Race, Slavery, and Emancipation (Chapel Hill, 1993), 261-62; 1870 Census, Grainger, Greene, Grundy, and Hamilton Counties.

worth of \$1,244. By 1870, 16,904 blacks in the state owned a total of \$6,514,400 worth of real property, for an average worth of \$385.<sup>34</sup>

But most children lived with landless families who were only a few dollars away from apprenticing them out. Historian Stephen Ash's sample of 416 black families in Middle Tennessee in 1870 reveals a mean wealth (personal and real) of \$113; neighboring whites averaged \$4,763. The percentage of propertyless black families was 67, and 58 percent of black families were landless agricultural workers. While turning these statistics on their head reveals that more than a third had property of some sort, not many owned anything substantial. For the majority of freedmen in Tennessee, the apathy of the federal government and the determination of former Confederates to reclaim confiscated land made the notion of land ownership and true independence only wishful thinking. But during Reconstruction, many black Tennesseans made impressive financial gains in property ownership--quite an accomplishment for a people who less than ten years before were considered property.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Loren Schweninger, Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915 (Urbana, 1990; reprint, Urbana, 1997); Loren Schweninger, "Black Economic Reconstruction in the South," in Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., eds., The Facts of Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of John Hope Franklin (Baton Rouge, 1991), 180-181, 183-84.

<sup>35</sup> Ash, Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 224; Schweninger, "Black Economic Reconstruction," 188.

Even though many Tennessee blacks were able to establish their families on a secure foundation after the war, life for freedmen remained hard. Certain policies of the Bureau, the often unrealistic admonitions of Northern missionaries, the unpredictable incidence of disease and inclement weather, and the resistance of white Conservatives all worked against freedmen. Depending on others for protection, provision, and instruction, freed children were especially vulnerable in this time of change.

Blacks dealt with whites manipulating and violating labor contracts and undermining not only their goals but also those of missionaries and Bureau agents. For whites, labor contracts were a means to reassert power and make a profit. The illiteracy and dire poverty of the recently emancipated blacks generally gave whites the upper hand in contractual negotiations and kept freedmen financially dependent. As Captain George Judd, sub-assistant commissioner of Pulaski, reported, "Contracts are so made that they [freedmen] have no chance. The power is all in the hands of the employer." Even the assertive and astute were often taken advantage of. Immediately after the harvest, white employers in Rutherford County drove many hard-working black laborers from their homes. After sweating in the fields for the majority of the year, many blacks in Benton, Carroll, and Weakley counties were also driven from their homes without one penny of compensation. Undoubtedly, many families were separated as a result of this forced exodus. And even those parents who kept their families together in these terrible circumstances found it difficult to feed and clothe themselves and their children.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Freedmen's Affairs, 28, 30, 47; F. S. Palmer to H. S. Brown, 16 May 1866, SRTN, r. 38; R. D. Scott to C. B. Fisk, 9 Jun. 1866, RACTN, r. 11; H. B. Spelman to John Eaton,

Loss of pay also resulted in a lack of medical care for children. Professional medical care was a luxury; among the less fortunate, the sting of death and untreated sickness was commonly felt. Some of those in the towns, however, especially Nashville and Memphis, lived close to Bureau hospitals, where black nurses and matrons helped white doctors treat patients. Rural freedmen needing medical attention could summon doctors stationed at the dispensaries established by the Bureau. Medical care was not cheap, however. Parents paid four dollars for help in giving birth, fifty cents for prescriptions, and twenty-five cents for teeth extractions and vaccinations. Fretful parents could call for a doctor to examine their children: within the city limits, the fee was seventy-five cents; those in the country paid the doctor twenty-five cents per mile of travel. Parents of sick children in the less accessible areas depended more on home remedies and the will of God than professional medicine. At the end of 1866, as part of its effort to teach free-labor principles, the Bureau closed its hospitals, forcing all freedmen either to pay market prices for professional care or do without.<sup>37</sup>

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22 Feb. 1865, John Eaton Papers, hereinafter cited as JEP, Special Collections, University of Tennessee; Contract of J. R. Jones, 15 Dec. 1865, RACTN, r. 21; List of Outrages, April 1865-March 1866, Report of Lt. Col. Fred S. Palmer, 1866, J. H. Puckett, Hickman County, in Register of Outrages, Oct. 1865-July 1868, RACTN, r. 34.

<sup>37</sup> A. C. Swartzwelder to Caleb W. Homer, 13 Apr. 1866, A. C. Swartzwelder to G. F. Huntington, 18 May 1866, RACTN, r. 11; J. A. Grove to A. C. Swartzwelder 3 Oct.

Large numbers of blacks died from illnesses that are curable nowadays.

According to the 1870 census, the main causes of death among Tennessee freedmen were consumption (tuberculosis), pneumonia, encephalitis, croup (inflammation of the respiratory system), enteric fever (typhoid), diarrhea, measles, and whooping cough. Children died in great numbers, for they (along with the elderly) were the most susceptible to sickness. Childbirth claimed its victims, too: in the year preceding the census, forty-three mothers died giving birth, and 113 black children never lived outside of the womb. Of those babies who lived on, more than a few died from teething. In all of the sicknesses, except for teething, whites died in greater numbers than blacks, but the black population had the higher proportion of deaths in every category.<sup>38</sup>

The smallpox epidemic of 1866 left no class or color untouched, but its deadly hand gripped primarily the underprivileged communities, squeezing not only life but hope out of freedmen. The close proximity of town residents and popular ignorance of sanitation facilitated the spread of the disease. Even many who made it to hospitals took their last breath there. By all accounts, the epidemic began in late 1865 and plagued Tennessee freedmen through much of 1866. Bureau agents shook their heads in dismay

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1865, A. C. Swartzwelder to C. W. Homer, 21 Nov. 1865, SRTN, A. C. Swartzwelder to C. B. Fisk, 19 Dec. 1865, SRTN, r. 7.

<sup>38</sup> The Vital Statistics of the United States, Embracing the Tables of Deaths, Births, and Age, Vol. 11 (Washington, 1872), 6-7, 15, 380-81, hereinafter cited as Vital Statistics.



at the “fearful amount” of deaths in Middle and West Tennessee. The disease was so prevalent in Pulaski, for instance, that whites and blacks shut themselves inside their homes hoping death would pass them over, as the afflicted wandered through town searching desperately for treatment.<sup>39</sup>

Incidents of smallpox were reported even in the schools, confronting black parents with a tough choice: let children attend school and risk smallpox or keep them home and miss lessons. In Giles County, parents faced another problem: frantic whites threatened violent eradication of what they perceived as the disease’s source: freedmen. The pleas of black Giles countians for medical treatment, financial aid, and protection went unanswered.<sup>40</sup>

Some of the friends of the freedmen stepped in to help those afflicted by the epidemic. Deeply touched by their plight, Lawrence Johnson, the white president of the Nashville Union League, spent time and money assisting them. In spite of the protestations of the local Bureau agents, the Bureau’s top officials refused to reimburse Johnson for the \$652.89 he spent. Eventually his humanitarian work ruined his credit, and he was no longer able to help his suffering neighbors. An afflicted Johnsonville

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Chimble to C. B. Fisk, 16 Jan. 1866, RACTN, RLR, G-M, r. 10; John A. Jackson to Maj. Lawrence, 26 Feb. 1866, RACTN, RLR, G-M, r. 10.

<sup>40</sup> John A. Jackson to Fisk, 9 Mar. 1866, A. D. Oviatt to Fisk, 17 Jan. 1866, RACTN, RLR, N-S, r. 11.

freedwoman and her children received the attention of the Bureau agent M. D. Oviatt, who pleaded with the Nashville headquarters to provide medical assistance; without it, he said, the young ones would become a liability to the government.<sup>41</sup>

If freed children escaped the clutches of smallpox, they still had to face the threat of cholera. Freedmen died from cholera in great numbers across the South, prompting Clinton Fisk to institute preventive measures. Blaming many of the deaths on overcrowding and filth in the towns, he started sanitation efforts. Thus in 1866, freed children saw Bureau agents surveying neighborhoods to identify unhealthy locations and saw their parents listening as representatives of the Freedmen's Sanitary Commission explained how cleanliness prevented disease. But disease entered even the most spotless of homes, so in 1866 Fisk ordered Bureau agents to work with civil authorities in stationing doctors close to black neighborhoods. The educational efforts could not save everyone: 292 freedmen, of whom 281 were infants, died in the epidemics of the late 1860s.<sup>42</sup>

Children needed protection not only from rampant disease but also from violent whites. Election years were especially violent because many white Tennesseans feared

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<sup>41</sup> John A. Jackson to Maj. Lawrence, 26 Feb. 1866, John A. Jackson to General Fisk, 9 Mar. 1866, RACTN, RLR, G-M, r. 10; M. D. Oviatt to Gen. C. B. Fisk, 15 Mar. 1866, RACTN, RLR, N-S, r. 11.

<sup>42</sup> Clinton Fisk, "Circular no. 9," 2 Apr. 1866, RACTN, r. 16; Vital Statistics, 382.

the effect of black suffrage, and many more resented blacks casting ballots at all—even for their own political party. According to Bureau agents, the state was especially rife with racial violence during the 1868 presidential election. As election day neared, violence increased, and children learned that trouble awaited black voters. Many heard how former Confederates were well-organized at the polls and tried to intimidate their fathers for simply asserting their newly acquired civil rights. When local authorities ignored such abuses, children witnessed their parents' reliance on the Bureau for protection.<sup>43</sup>

Rural children, in particular, often lived amid lawlessness and disorder. Neither the Tennessee State Guard nor the Bureau could altogether prevent violence against blacks in the countryside; one agent reported that it was simply impossible to protect rural freedmen. The minds of many children—at least those old enough to comprehend—were often seared with horrible images of violence. The children of Thomas Love, for example, were abruptly awakened one night by a group of thugs, some wearing masks and some with blackened faces, who threatened to kill them if their father stayed in

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<sup>43</sup> John W. Alvord, Seventh Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen (January 1869) (Washington, 1869), 41, hereinafter cited as Seventh SAR; J. G. Reeves to Wm. Brownlow, 24 Feb. 1868, Box 1, File, 11, William G. Brownlow Papers, hereinafter cited as WBP, Special Collections, University of Tennessee; Record of Outrages, Oct. 1865–July 1868, Giles County, RACTN, r. 34; Special Order no. 166, Nashville Office, 30 Oct. 1866, RACTN, r. 16.

Davidson County. Love left immediately with his family, escaping into the darkness of the winter night, leaving possessions and security behind. Other children witnessed their parents being beaten: in Bolivar one night, four white men broke into Henry Johnson's house and assaulted him in bed. Many such break-ins had a political purpose: near Columbia, children of Anthony Gillespie, a Union League member, heard eight men storm into their house and beat their pregnant mother. Others ended in grisly scenes: erroneously thinking that the six intruders came exclusively for him, a Union League member, Lewis Powell of Hickman County fled for safety, but on his return was devastated by the sight of his wailing daughters and his wife's bullet-riddled body. Other children were victims of robbery. Blacks were frequently deprived of what little they had accumulated: outside of Memphis, for example, white robbers pushed around Nancy Whitley and her six children and then took fifty dollars, leaving the family penniless. Some families with children were driven from their home. In McMinn County, two white men left George Swofford and family destitute when they burned their house and outbuildings; justice would be long in coming, for the local Bureau agent was terrified of the outlaws. Other children were physically harmed. One seventeen-year-old girl accused of stealing food was choked, dragged into the woods, strapped to a tree, and lashed dozens of times. Her two assailants threatened to kill her if she told anyone, yet she bravely reported the incident to the local Bureau office. In Maury County, two boys and their father were dragged into the woods and pistol-whipped.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Freedmen's Affairs, 29, 32, 41-43; J. H. Puckett, Hickman County, Register of Outrages, Oct. 1865-July 1868, RACTN, r. 34; J. R. Lewis to O. O. Howard, 10 Oct.

In some counties civil authorities actually administered impartial justice; in some, blacks luckily found sympathetic native whites willing to represent or testify on their behalf in the courtroom. But in many counties, blacks had no one to look out for them but the local Bureau agent. Some agents, such as Captain Michael Walsh, whose jurisdiction included Smyrna, Shelbyville, Winchester, and Pulaski, and Lt. Samuel Walker, who was posted in East Tennessee, made regular rounds to major outposts in their districts. In some counties, such visits were necessary, for whites there had threatened to kill freedmen who visited an agent's office. During outbreaks of white vigilantism, children also saw detachments of federal or state troops patrolling their localities. Some of these troops were black. The sight of such soldiers convinced many whites, such as Whit Ransom of Bedford County, that dishonoring contracts was unwise and that black families should be allowed to fulfill their contractual obligations unmolested.<sup>45</sup>

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1868, RACTN, r. 16; Affidavits of Nancy Whitley, Rachel Ray, and Lewis Powell, C. B. Fisk to John Jones, 24 Jan. 1866, M. H. Church to S. W. Groesbeck, 6 Nov. 1866, Reports of Outrages, Riots, and Murder, 15 Jan. 1866-12 Aug. 1866, RACTN, r. 34.

<sup>45</sup> J. R. Lewis to O. O. Howard, 10 Oct. 1868, RACTN, r. 16; J. G. Reeves to Wm. Brownlow, 24 Feb. 1868, File 11, Box 1, WBP; Special Order no. 118, Chattanooga Office, 1 Dec. 1868, no. 138, Nashville Office, 11 Oct. 1866, no. 166, Nashville Office, 30 Oct. 1866, RACTN, r. 16; Freedmen's Affairs, 46-47; Memphis Daily Appeal, 8 Mar. 1866.

Many times, black fathers had only their guns to protect children and property. Knowing that the Bureau could not be everywhere at once and believing that returning bullet for bullet deterred white thuggery, Clinton Fisk endorsed black gun ownership. It was best for some blacks to keep gun ownership a secret, however, for whites often attempted to disarm them. Members of the Yellow Jackets, a band of whites in Middle Tennessee who acted similarly to the Klan, made one black man walk barefooted and bareheaded in the snow to deliver up his pistol to the ring leader.<sup>46</sup>

In many instances, however, children saw adults protecting themselves and their children. Such was the case in 1866 in Rutherford County, where, as Collier Green of Smyrna remarked, “We are very badly treated. . . . The wit folk treating us like dogs.” Sick and tired of the “shuten and killing up [of] the colored men,” and without adequate protection by the Bureau, local freedmen decided to settle the matter with force. From 1866 to 1868 bands of armed blacks and whites trooped around trying to intimidate each other. Whichever side had fewer men was usually the one in retreat. Thus the white majority typically had the upperhand in this local racial war, but the sight of armed freedmen sent more than a few whites scattering into the woods.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Freedmen's Affairs, 29; Nashville Daily Press, 4 Jan. 1866.

<sup>47</sup> Freedmen's Affairs, 44-47; Collier Green to Nashville Office, 25 Aug. 1866, SRTN, r. 58.

The towns were violent places for children, too. Conditions there fostered serious violence against blacks, including riots. As noted in the previous chapter, in 1866 the children of Memphis lived through one of the worst riots of the nineteenth century. At the end of the Memphis riot, a massacre that had civil authorities' approval, twelve churches, eight schools, and fifty houses in the black community lay in ashes. Moreover, racial violence continued to plague the city until Governor Senter's rule began in 1869. In 1868 and 1869, young Memphians lived in what resembled a war zone; the sounds of shots zipping through the air and the thud of clubs pounding flesh were frequent. "Freedmen were whipped and beaten almost every night," wrote W. H. Stillwell to John Eaton. The first months of 1869 were second only to the 1866 riot in degree of violence in Memphis. One Radical claimed that the Klan ran amok through the streets, defying local authorities and terrorizing any freedmen or Radical opposing them. The rowdy Conservative and ex-Confederate elements made Memphis unsafe even for Northerners, some of whom were provoked to leave the city.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> W. H. Stillwell to John Eaton, 25 June, 28 Jan. 1869, L. B. Eaton to John Eaton, 7 Mar. 1869, Charles Eaton to John Eaton, n.d., JEP. Some Tennessee whites criticized newspapers for exaggerating. Seven men of Cuba, Tennessee, in Shelby County, denied reports that nine African-American men were murdered there the previous year; the only atrocity in Cuba, they claimed, was that "a few were driven from their homes, and some . . . maltreated." See Memphis Evening Post, 10 Feb. 1869.

Violence was not the only problem that plagued urban blacks. The crowded and filthy conditions of Tennessee towns during Reconstruction afflicted them as well. Many freedmen who migrated to the towns seeking a better life found that their situation changed little for the good; many lived from hand to mouth in ramshackle dwellings. The black shanties in Chattanooga, each of which housed anywhere from one to six families, were described by Bureau agent J. E. Jacobs as “breeders of pestilence, squalid in their external appearances [and] environed with rubbish.” He and many other agents blamed the dirty conditions for the outbreak of smallpox; by March 1866, 168 cases of smallpox had been reported in Chattanooga’s freedmen communities alone. Conditions were dreadful elsewhere, too. In Gallatin, one Bureau agent stumbled across rats eating dead blacks.<sup>49</sup>

The overcrowded conditions and the rapid pace of town life also distracted young freedmen from pursuing virtuous habits. Bureau agents and missionaries--and white Southerners, too--worried about temptations awaiting young freedmen. They worried particularly about teenage boys, for most were unemployed and, in their eyes, lacked proper parental care. Many had been expelled permanently from schools, reported concerned agents, because they could not conquer their inveterate bad habits and disregarded the moral lessons they had been taught. Some boys provided good reasons to worry about them. Daily in Memphis, for example, young freedmen committed crimes:

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<sup>49</sup> Seventh SAR, 57; M. D. Oviatt to Clinton Fisk, 17 Jan. 1866, RACTN, r. 5; J. E. Jacobs to Clinton B. Fisk, 12 Mar. 1866, SRTN, r. 38.



one day in February 1869 a teenager, age eighteen, stole a watch and a pistol; a boy, age ten, snatched a purse from a lady walking down the street; another stole \$15 from his employer; another robbed black boat hands at the dock and threatened them with a pistol. Even the smaller towns witnessed such juvenile delinquency: in Columbia one black boy stole \$2 from a white boy who was performing errands for his father. Many crimes happened because boys simply had too much time on their hands: loitering near the railroad tracks one day in Memphis, two rough-housing friends ended their play with one being shot fatally in the face.<sup>50</sup>

In the towns gang violence was not uncommon. In Chattanooga, much to the displeasure of agent Jacobs, black boys roamed around town with white boys, looking for trouble and throwing stones at buildings and people. The young hoodlums' activity created a problem for the Bureau. Although their rowdy behavior must be stopped, no one knew which boy was guilty of what crime. Fisk offered this advice: next time agents saw the interracial gang loitering or wandering around town, they were to arrest ten white boys and ten black boys. That way, no one could accuse the Bureau of racial discrimination. The order was followed.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Seventh SAR, 59-60; Memphis Evening Post, 10 Feb. 1869; Memphis Weekly Post, 9 Feb. 1869; Columbia Herald, 13 Aug. 1869; Memphis Daily Appeal, 6 Feb. 1866.

<sup>51</sup> John Ogden to C. B. Fisk, 8 Mar. 1866, Clinton Fisk to Assistant Commissioner's Office, 1 Mar. 1866, AMATN, r. 1.

Sometimes there was no greater threat to the stability of a black family than the actions of black parents. Many conscientious blacks tried to be exemplars of parenting. But in their struggle to provide for their dependents (which became increasingly difficult as the family grew), many fathers had to take jobs that took them away from loved ones for long periods. Consequently, many children were robbed of precious time with their fathers. While working away from the family, other fathers jeopardized family stability by neglecting to pay creditors. In one instance a mother had to bind her children out to neighboring whites for the amount her absent husband owed their landlord. Some blacks simply grew tired of carrying out their parental responsibilities and abandoned their children, many of whom were then taken in by former masters. In some cases it was actually best for children to live apart from their parents, for rumors of parental neglect and abuse were frequently verified by Bureau agents, who looked out for the best interest of the child and did not hesitate to deny custody to unfit parents.<sup>52</sup>

The Bureau itself, despite its good work for blacks, occasionally prevented freedmen from accomplishing their goals. Bureaucratic blunders and misguided policies frustrated the freedmen in various ways. Raising the fee for a marriage license from \$1 to \$2.50 may have seemed to agent Will Thomasson of Somerville a reasonable way to

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<sup>52</sup> J. J. Holloway to C. B. Fisk, 23 Feb. 1866, Memphis Office to [?] Williamson, 25 Nov. 1865, SRTN, r. 17; Samuel Howard to Superintendent of Nashville, Tennessee, 9 Mar. 1866, RACTN, RLR, G-M, r. 10; Polly Reaves to Memphis District Office, 17 Nov. 1866, RACTN, ES, r. 5.

increase his office fund, but it denied the poorest black couples the ability to marry and relegated their children to illegitimacy. In another case, whites and blacks alike questioned an agent's personal levy of a 20 percent tax on saloon sales. Agent Barr may have intended simply to put a crimp in the local liquor business, but what he did instead was make blacks in Lebanon resentful of the Bureau and all the advice its agents offered. In Clarksville, some grew so skeptical of the actions of their local agents that they petitioned General Fisk to replace him. At other times, inept bureaucrats prevented the formation of the nuclear family. As will be recalled, some letters from parents requesting help in locating their children were misfiled. Hospitals made their share of blunders, too. Fisk's staff had difficulty determining the condition of the Bureau hospitals in Memphis, for many reports never arrived at the state office. The director of hospitals there claimed that local agents were to blame. While bureaucrats passed the buck and Fisk investigated, medical care for black Memphians suffered.<sup>53</sup>

The free-labor policies of the Bureau hurt the freedmen even more. Since the closing of the contraband camps in the latter part of 1865, Bureau agents had purposefully forced freedmen to rely on their own devices and had slowly deprived them of the federal dole. But tough conditions in Tennessee in the ensuing years, including epidemics, harsh winters, and dry summers, made it difficult for parents to provide for

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<sup>53</sup> Will Thomasson to C. B. Fisk, 15 Mar. 1866, RACTN, RLR, T-Z, r. 12; Wm. Barry to C. B. Fisk, 26 Dec. 1865, RACTN, RLR, A-D, r. 6; Petition to General Fisk, in John Roberts to Clinton Fisk, 18 May 1866, RACTN, r. 5.

their children. Many blacks, especially single mothers, stayed in former contraband camps until the last possible moment, but Fisk insisted that freedmen build “their own homes where if they can not support themselves they must be aided by their own Counties or State.” Assured that benevolent societies such as the Western Freedmen’s Aid Association and the American Missionary Association were continuing to assist blacks, Bureau agents ceased providing clothing and rations. On behalf of freedmen, agents still solicited the aid of benevolent organizations, but destitution persisted in many places. Despite the continuing flow of petitions into the Nashville office, the top officials resolved in 1866 that only those freedmen in extreme necessity would receive aid. By 1868 Superintendent Carlin ceased distributing rations for any reason. Some local agents continued to issue rations without authorization, but they eventually stopped after being reprimanded for letting their “feelings of humanity” interfere with the development of free-labor principles among the blacks. A few continued to use their own money to assist freedmen, but such limited aid could not undo the effects of the national and state superintendents’ orders.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Clinton Fisk to Hugh Smith, 26 July 1865, Clinton Fisk to J. M. Goodfellow, 1 Aug. 1865, RACTN, r. 1; James Ware to J. E. Jacob, 28 Feb. 1866, Joel B. Smith to C. B. Fisk, 28 Feb. 1866, John Lawrence to J. E. Jacob, 28 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 17; “Answers to Questions by Judge Bond,” 2 Sept. 1866, RACTN, r. 51; Jonathan Henry to J. E. Jacobs, 29 June 1866, Thomas Chimble to General Fisk, 16 Jan. 1866, RACTN, r. 10, RLR, G-M.

If families could not obtain government benevolence, they expected the government at least to pay its debt to them. A number of black men (or their families if they had died) were owed for labor performed for the government during the war. As late as October 1869, many families still awaited payment for the labor their husbands or sons rendered on the defenses of Nashville; many were owed hundreds of dollars, a significant figure for anyone living in squalor and struggling to make ends meet.<sup>55</sup>

State paternalism also undermined the establishment of nuclear families. The Bureau, along with state and local governments, intervened frequently in the affairs of black families. But it was more likely to provide assistance to financially struggling women than to men, for it expected men to be the breadwinners. Black families were hungry and homeless, some Bureau agents and missionaries supposed, because the man acted irresponsibly and unmanly. But often unforeseen and unpreventable circumstances forced dutiful husbands to ask the Bureau for rations or protection. Moreover, husbands and fathers no doubt knew that their wives and children understood that the Bureau provided protection and assistance when they could not. Yet when the Bureau refused to give a father rations and admonished him instead to work harder, he no doubt returned

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<sup>55</sup> J. B. Coons to Fred S. Palmer, 27 Apr. 1870, SRTN, r. 48, v. 53; Minor Goodall to Lt. Alden, 12 Feb. 1866, RACTN, RLR, G-M, r. 10.

home to a disappointed family, who wondered if he could ever provide sufficiently for them.<sup>56</sup>

But some men mistreated their families and were deserving not only of the scorn of agents but also punishment. In more than a few cases, women reported that their husbands had abused them or their child. These freedmen, in a drunken rage or amid a heated argument, had mercilessly beaten them. Agents feared that such an example undermined the nuclear family and stunted the moral growth of children. So they intervened and punished the violent husband or father. In 1866 George Porter was tried for “whipping his wife,” and Frank Cole and Bill Horn appeared in court for being drunk and disorderly.<sup>57</sup>

The Bureau, however, generally sought to work within state laws, not beyond them—especially after 1867, when the agency trusted civil authorities to take care of legal matters. Agents increasingly referred victims of domestic violence and child abuse to their local government officials before intervening; after one agent read a complaint of

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<sup>56</sup> Memphis Daily Appeal, 4 Jan. 1866; Will R. Story to John J. King, 16 Aug. 1865, Will R. Story Letter, Special Collections, University of Tennessee; R. P. Haley to C. B. Fisk, 12 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 10, RLR, G-M; S. Burbank to Lucinda Brooks, 28 Mar. 1867, RACTN, r. 5, ES, v. 3; Paul R. Hambrick to O. Brown, 7 Sept. 1867, RACTN, r. 5, ES, v.3.

<sup>57</sup> Memphis Daily Appeal, 4 Jan. 1866.

how a freedman neglected his children, he responded that the man fell under Tennessee laws just as much as a white man: there was nothing the agent could do.<sup>58</sup>

Many times freedmen concluded that there was nothing more they themselves could do. The Bureau and missionaries encouraged the establishment of the nuclear family because they considered it the foundation of moral and economic Reconstruction. Many black parents did form nuclear families and worked persistently to make a better life, striving to keep the families united while searching for opportunities. Many children benefited from such a secure and protective environment. But unpredictable circumstances, defiant white ex-Confederates and Conservatives, and even Bureau policies and bureaucratic red tape prevented many children from enjoying the benefits of a truly independent family. Freedom was indeed better than slavery, but black children still lived in difficult times.

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<sup>58</sup> Fred S. Palmer to James Brownlow, 12 June 1867, RACTN, r. 5, ES, v.3.

## CHAPTER IV

### SEPARATED FROM THE FAMILY: BLACK APPRENTICES AND ORPHANS

Some black children never lived in a nuclear family, for circumstances of war and Reconstruction had snapped their family bonds. Many orphans looked for a handout and a place to live and depended ultimately on other freedmen, Northern missionaries, or Bureau agents for sustenance and protection. Apprenticeships with whites sometimes provided the best living conditions for orphans and for children of single mothers, who often barely made enough to survive much less provide for their children. In short, many children could not live in the ideal nuclear family imagined by freedmen, Bureau agents, and Northern missionaries. For them the days of freedom were ones of separation from loved ones.

The reunification of black families was one of the happier moments of Reconstruction, but one of the saddest sights was that of the destitute wandering hopelessly through towns and countryside looking for something to eat and a place to sleep. Many of the impoverished had formerly lived in contraband camps, but when the Bureau disbanded the camps, penniless blacks, many of whom were the elderly, infirm, or young, were cast into the streets and highways of Tennessee. Some "helpless women and orphan children" wandered into Kentucky, according to one Tennessee Bureau agent, only to find little help there and much trouble from "those rascally Kentuckians." Other indigent blacks traveled to Nashville. In 1865 R. E. Farwell, the commander of the Clarksville contraband camp, removed orphans to an asylum in the capital, where they would be given the necessary care yet would no longer be wards of the federal



government. But it was impossible in many cases for hard-pressed local authorities to provide for indigents, whether black or white. One Bureau agent reported that in many places no support at all was given to “pauper blacks”; in his district of Lauderdale County, only one orphan had been provided for. With the following rhyme, W. A. Sorrell, a disappointed Bureau agent, summed up what he observed across his district:

It makes my heart with sorrow bleed  
To hear poor orphans cry  
Around their mother for their bread  
And she too poor to buy.<sup>1</sup>

In the towns, young orphans were among the weakest and most helpless of the destitute. Six-year-old twin girls of Memphis, whose father was disabled, were found near death in a house abandoned by their female guardian. They would undoubtedly have died soon, for they were little more than skeletons and too feeble to walk. With no

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<sup>1</sup> R. E. Farwell to General Fisk, 10 Aug. 1865, Selected Records of the Tennessee Field Office of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872, hereinafter cited as SRTN, National Archives, Washington, D. C. (microfilm); F. S. Palmer to H. S. Brown, 1 June 1866, SRTN, r. 38; W. A. Sorrell to General Fisk, 27 Feb. 1866, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Tennessee Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, r. 17, hereinafter cited as RACTN, National Archives, Washington, D. C. (microfilm).

father, mother, or “kin-folks,” a confused eleven-year-old boy named Andy Smith wandered the streets of Memphis for days in his lice-ridden clothes crying for help. Times were so hard that some orphans even had their bedding and clothing stolen by other freedmen.<sup>2</sup>

Many orphans, however, found refuge in the homes of extended family members or elderly black non-relatives, some of whom needed assistance just as much as the children. Others found sanctuary with the aged on the farms of their former masters. Grandmothers, for instance, in some cases provided not only for their orphaned grandchildren but also for other orphans in the community. In one instance, a Tennessee grandmother was too feeble to continue providing for her orphaned grandson, so members of the black community asked his aunt to be his caregiver. Surrounded by familiar sights and people on the farm, such orphans were better provided for than many in the towns. Nine young Nashvillians whose fathers had died in the war and whose mothers’ whereabouts were unknown resided with an elderly woman in a dilapidated shanty that provided little protection from the wind and rain. In the winter of 1865-1866,

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<sup>2</sup> “Extracts from Mrs. Canfield’s Diary,” in Extracts from Documents in the Office of the General Superintendent of Refugees and Freedmen. Head-quarters, Memphis, Tennessee. (Memphis, 1865), 18, 22, 23, hereinafter cited as Extracts.

these ragged children and their elderly guardian lived miserably, their hands and feet numb and their stomachs aching with hunger.<sup>3</sup>

The fortunate secured shelter and food from the more prosperous blacks. In Gallatin, many blacks eagerly adopted orphans who had recently lived in the contraband camps. But according to Bureau agents elsewhere in Tennessee, freedmen by and large were reluctant to adopt and had to be persuaded to do so. To be sure, there was good reason for their reluctance, for many already had enough financial worries. Some agents, however, were baffled at the indifference of the more affluent blacks toward the poor. One commented that it was “next to impossible to induce the more influential and wealthy” to care one bit about the destitute freedmen. But missionaries were confident that once conditions improved freedmen would take care of their own “with great liberality”; as early as October 1865, some black Memphians had raised almost \$3,000 for local orphanages.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> H. P. Nick to General Fisk, 23 Jan. 1866, RACTN, RLR, N-S, r. 11; Jno. Henry to C. B. Fisk, 29 May 1866, RACTN, r. 10; E. A. Eaton to AMA Headquarters, 12 Feb. 1866, American Missionary Manuscripts, Tennessee, r. 2, hereinafter cited as AMATN, Amistad Research Center, Dillard University, New Orleans (microfilm).

<sup>4</sup> W. A. Sorrell to General Fisk, 27 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 17; Office of the Superintendent of Memphis to General Fisk, 15 Jan. 1866, RACTN, r. 16; Petition to “The Benevolent and Philanthropic Friends of the Freedmen,” 16 Oct. 1865, AMATN, r. 1.

Some older orphans were able to survive on their own. Teenage boys in particular sometimes negotiated contracts with whites by themselves. In Fayette County, six of J. C. Ellington's twelve workers were teenagers. These boys worked alongside men in their thirties and forties, yet generally made a little less: for a year's work on the farm, the men received \$70 and the boys \$62.50. One twelve-year-old named Bill Matthews worked for M. I. Johnson, also of Fayette County, for \$12 a month, two pairs of shoes, and summer and winter garments; but if in need of medical attention, the young laborer was on his own.<sup>5</sup>

In the towns orphans found protection and food at orphanages founded by Northern missionaries. As early as 1863 in occupied Memphis, Northerners began relief efforts among the indigent and orphaned. Under the auspices of Colonel John Eaton, supervisor of the freedmen in the Mississippi Valley, Eliza Mitchell established an orphanage in a house on President's Island. Within a few months, approximately fifty children were under her care. In the same year, Martha Canfield, working with General A. L. Chetlain and receiving donations from Northern benevolent associations and even ex-Confederates, started a school in Memphis. By 1865, Canfield founded an orphanage there for black children. She raised money and procured food, clothing, and school furniture and supplies from various denominational, secular, and government agencies,

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<sup>5</sup> Contract with J. C. Ellington, n.d., microfilm p. 51, contract with M. I. Johnson, 9 Dec. 1865, RACTN, r. 21.

including the U. S. Sanitary Commission, Western Freedmen's Aid Commission (Cincinnati, Ohio), Society of Friends (Indianapolis, Indiana), Ladies of the Baptist Society (Algoma, Wisconsin), and C. F. Chamberlin and Company (Memphis, Tennessee). Orphans in the capital city also benefited from the altruism of whites. Agents and missionaries were shocked at the horrible condition of the destitute and orphaned there. With the Bureau's help, E. S. Cameron, president of the Ladies Union Aid Society, established an orphanage in 1865 Nashville where many of the suffering found refuge.<sup>6</sup>

The existence of orphanages, however, remained tenuous throughout Reconstruction. Reminding General Fisk that many of the orphans had had fathers who were slaughtered fighting for the Union at Fort Pillow, Milliken's Bend, and Guntown, Canfield and Northern missionaries petitioned the Bureau for clothing and fuel to last the children through the winter of 1865-1866. Thanks to Eaton and Captain Thomas A. Walker, superintendent of freedmen in the district of Memphis, Canfield's orphanage was given rations from the local commissary and fuel from the coal depot. But it was impossible to answer every request, for Congress regulated Bureau and military spending. Bureau agents thus found bureaucratic loopholes and used creative

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<sup>6</sup> John Eaton, Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen; Reminiscences of the Civil War with Special Reference to the Work for the Contrabands and Freedmen of the Mississippi Valley (New York, 1907), 201-202; "Extracts from Mrs. Canfield's Diary" in Extracts, 14; Special Order no. 4, Nashville Office, 3 July 1865, RACTN, r. 16.

bookkeeping to assist orphanages. Congress was aware of such tricks, and by 1866 it restricted the agency's discretionary spending. From the very beginning, however, one thing Canfield could depend on was blacks volunteering to help. A black Baptist preacher, Morris Henderson, for one, recruited volunteers to handle the daily operations of the orphanage while Canfield concentrated on management and fundraising.<sup>7</sup>

An orphanage was a god-send for many children. With nowhere else to go, many arrived at the door of orphanages and soon received their first nutritious meal in a long time. Those needing medical attention also found it at the orphanages, and the severely ill were immediately sent to the local freedmen's hospital. Some children old enough to survive on their own still sought temporary refuge at orphanages. There they received medical attention, if needed, and as a result many avoided an early death; of the sixty-three who arrived at Canfield's orphanage during the winter of 1865-1866, only one died. Abused children appreciated the smallest acts of kindness and attention, and at the orphanage found the love they had so long yearned for. The children also benefited from the education offered at the orphanages, which in some places, especially during the

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<sup>7</sup> Petition to "The Benevolent and Philanthropic Friends of Freedmen," 16 Oct. 1865, AMATN, r. 1; Edgar [?] to F. J. Palmer, 23 Dec. 1867, SRTN, r. 8; O. O. Howard to C. B. Fisk, 23 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 10, RLR, G-M; John Cimprich, Slavery's End in Tennessee, 1861-1865 (University, 1985), 75; "Colored Orphan Asylum" in Extracts, 12-13; "Extracts from Mrs. Canfield's Diary" in Extracts, 18, 23.

immediate post-war months, provided the only tuition-free schools. According to Bureau reports, orphanage students outperformed all other black students across the state.<sup>8</sup>

Children learned in the orphanages not only reading and writing but also spiritual and civic lessons that fostered the acceptance of Victorian values. The curriculum included lessons on the virtues of property ownership, thrift, and hard work. Every effort was made also to get children into the pews of a local church on Sunday mornings. On Saturday nights, black children took baths and tidied up their Sunday best in preparation for church services. Along with the nurses, the older children helped the younger ones get ready and altered, if needed, a Sunday outfit for the new residents. At the church services held at the orphanages, children frequently were spellbound by the local black preachers and visiting white missionaries, and were taught civic and spiritual lessons by Northern schoolmarm the next day.<sup>9</sup>

Life in the orphanages was such an improvement that many children wanted to live nowhere else. One girl named Jenny Lind, who had hardly any “African blood coursing through her veins,” believed that genuine acceptance could be found only in the orphanage among the missionaries and not out in the city, where mixed ancestry

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<sup>8</sup> “Colored Orphan Asylum” in Extracts, 13, 15-16; “Extracts from Mrs. Canfield’s Diary” in Extracts, 18, 21, 24; school reports in SRTN, r. 51, passim.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Fulgham to General Fisk, 21 June 1865, SRTN, r. 51; “Colored Orphan Asylum” in Extracts, 16; “Extracts from Mrs. Canfield’s Diary” in Extracts, 19.

relegated many to a racial no man's land. Ordered to take up residence in the home of a white family, young Jenny pleaded with the staff to let her stay, but to no avail. Another girl, named Lizzie, was angry when the orphanage returned her to her irresponsible mother—which, under state law, it had no other choice.<sup>10</sup>

But some experiences at the orphanages resembled those in slavery. It was expected that orphanage directors would apprentice out children as soon as good homes were found for them. In the orphanages, children saw whites in search of domestic servants or farmhands looking at them and discussing which child was capable of what work. At other times, children were brought by twos or threes into a room where whites inspected them.<sup>11</sup>

The Bureau pressured orphanage directors to bind out the children. Agents encouraged whites to apprentice orphans and even informed orphanage directors what sex and ages the prospective employers preferred. The Bureau had no objection to whites visually inspecting the children to decide which one to employ. And agents did not hesitate to remind directors that they possessed records of the children in orphanages and could easily find out if directors sheltered their favorites from apprenticeship. In some

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<sup>10</sup> “Extracts from Mrs. Canfield’s Diary” in Extracts, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Sub-District Office of Memphis to General Fisk, 1 Dec. 1865, Sub-District of Memphis Office to Martha Canfield, 2 Dec. 1865, Endorsement Sent (ES), RACTN, r. 51.



cases, agents threatened to stop sending rations if apprenticeship quotas were not met. In one instance, after some women complained about being allowed to inspect only a few girls at Canfield's orphanage, the Memphis Bureau reminded the director that she had an obligation to show all the children.<sup>12</sup>

Agents strongly advocated apprenticeship, deeming it a solution to the financial problems besetting black and white Southerners. For one thing, apprenticeships kept young blacks from being wards of the state. Furthermore, apprenticeships offered financially-strapped parents a means to provide for their children and offered whites a way to secure much-needed labor. Both master and apprentice had obligations: the child promised to work hard and obey all lawful commands, and the master vowed to instruct and provide for the indentured child.

Apprenticeships had existed in Tennessee from the beginning of its statehood. The apprenticeship law inherited from North Carolina stipulated that the names of orphans be submitted to the county courts; that indigent children be bound until they reached adulthood (age 21 for males and 18 for females); that masters properly feed, clothe, and shelter apprentices and teach them how to read and write; that masters pay apprentices a specified amount at the end of their service; that courts annul apprenticeships if a child was mistreated; that a copy of the indenture be kept in the courthouse; and that an abused apprentice could litigate to recover damages. New

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<sup>12</sup> Office of the Sub-District of Memphis and the Brigadier General to Martha Canfield, 9 Nov. 1865, 2 Dec. 1865, ES, RACTN, r. 51.

provisions were added in an 1858 amendment to the law: no apprentice was to be removed from the county in which he or she was bound, no one could harbor or hire an orphan without the county court's assent, apprentices must be taught not only to read and write but also to do simple arithmetic, indentured persons were to receive a minimum of \$20 and a suit of clothes at the end of the apprenticeship, and illegitimate children could be bound out without the mother's consent if she was deemed immoral. Like all other Southern states during Reconstruction, Tennessee followed antebellum apprenticeship laws without change.<sup>13</sup>

During Reconstruction the Bureau and the states regulated black apprenticeships. The specific provisions of the contracts varied from individual to individual, county to county, and region to region, but typically black parents did not profit from an apprenticeship. Although parental consent was needed for a child to be apprenticed, agents regularly searched for reputable employers and had the final say on which ones

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<sup>13</sup> Alan N. Miller, ed., East Tennessee's Forgotten Children: Apprentices from 1778 to 1911 (Baltimore, 2001), vii-viii; Return J. Meigs and William F. Cooper, eds., The Code of Tennessee Enacted by the General Assembly of 1857-1858 (Nashville, 1858), 498-99; Seymour D. Thompson and Thomas M. Steiger, eds., A Compilation of the Statute Laws of the State of Tennessee. Of a General and Permanent Nature, Compiled on the Basis of the Code of Tennessee, with Notes, and References, including Acts of Session of 1870-1871 (St. Louis, 1873), 1141-43.

would be masters. Once approved, employers pledged to fulfill contractual obligations or pay a \$500 fine to the state.<sup>14</sup>

Some historians consider the postwar apprenticeship system of the South to have been a means of race and labor control, in some ways a continuation of slavery. According to Noralee Frankel, apprenticeships posed “one of the greatest threats to the African American family and African American parental authority,” for parents had limited rights, and children none. Many freedmen were skeptical of the system, believing that whites took advantage of it to the detriment of blacks. Bureau offices received many complaints from parents about contract violations. Without proper enforcement of apprenticeship contracts, scholars argue, the life of indentured children could prove to be little different from, if not actually worse than, slavery.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Apprenticeship contract between Samuel Adams and Bedford Pyles, 21 Dec. 1865, RACTN, r. 20; Meigs and Cooper, Code of Tennessee, 498-99; Thompson and Steiger, Compilation of the Statute Laws of the State of Tennessee, 1141-43.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Foner, Reconstruction: The Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1867 (New York, 1988), 201; Noralee Frankel, Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi (Bloomington, 1999), 138-43; Peter Bardaglio, Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South (Chapel Hill, 1995), 161-63; Elizabeth Regosin, Freedom's Promise: Ex-Slave Families and Citizenship in the Age of Emancipation (Charlottesville, 2002), 133; Dylan Penningroth, The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-

Some former Tennessee slave owners resisted the end of slavery by retaining black children on their farms, in some cases going to great lengths to do so. Some hid children from black parents and Bureau agents by secretly moving them from place to place every few days. From the beginning of Reconstruction, many whites ignored the freedmen's parental rights because they refused to recognize blacks as a freed people: since blacks were still slaves, one white woman rationalized, they had no right to their children. Impressed to work on the forts near Nashville, Samuel Emery of Wilson County was reunited with his wife after the war, but the couple could not persuade their former owner, Mrs. Blair, to relinquish their four children. Eventually the local Bureau agent intervened, but he had little success dealing with the indignant Blair, who uttered the "most opprobrious epithets against the federal government" and declared that the "children should never be granted their freedom." He sought advice from his superiors on how to deal with this unreconstructed slave mistress.<sup>16</sup>

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Century South (Chapel Hill, 2003), 167-70; Rebecca Scott, "The Battle Over the Child: Child Apprenticeship and the Freedmen's Bureau in North Carolina," Prologue 10 (Summer 1978): 101-13.

<sup>16</sup> A. T. Reen to Mr. Dafoe, 8 Dec. 1865, SRTN, r. 51; Urbain Ozanne to William Brownlow, 4 Oct. 1865, United States Army Continental Commands, Records, 1821-1920, RG 393, Vol. II, E 2922, no. 184 (Dist of Nashville, et. al.), Letters and Reports, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

Many Tennessee whites disliked the obligations imposed by an apprenticeship contract and did everything possible to avoid entering into one and submitting to Bureau oversight. Some abducted black children and forced them to work on their farms or in their shops. The crowds and bustle of the towns made many kidnappings undetectable. On the streets of Nashville and Memphis, in particular, unsupervised children were snatched away and forced to live in captivity for months until Bureau agents rescued them.<sup>17</sup>

For different reasons, black parents preferred that their children avoid a life of apprenticeship. They hoped to maintain custody of their children, and as noted in the previous chapter, they did everything possible to do so. But the crippled condition of the state's postwar economy forced many black parents to turn to apprenticeships.

Those suffering the most in these conditions were children living with single black mothers. Such women very often struggled to make ends meet and keep their children clothed and fed. Even war widows, recipients of pensions and bounties, in many cases suffered during the unpredictable economic cycles of Reconstruction. Mothers of large families had a particularly trying time, and their children were not always cognizant of the sacrifices they made. To feed her eight children, a beautiful freedwoman of Robertson County named Alley decided there was no other recourse than, for thirty

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<sup>17</sup> Memphis Daily Appeal, 23 Jan. 1866; Special Order 166 of J. W. Groesbeck (Nashville Office), 30 Oct. 1866, RACTN, r. 16.

dollars a month, to live with a man so he could “gratify his Hellish passions” and “brutal propensities.”<sup>18</sup>

Most mothers, however, negotiated better deals that kept them and the children together. Sally Sale of Fayette County convinced D. W. A. Harris to lodge her and her two daughters, aged 13 and 3, on his farm and to provide them with “fuel, substantial and healthy rations, [and] all necessary medical attendance and supplies.” For \$16 a month, the mother cooked Harris’s meals and washed and ironed his clothes, and Harris required the eldest girl to perform domestic tasks and the toddler to “perform what labor she is fitted for.” Some single mothers earned enough and were frugal enough to save money for the needs of their children: Julia Song of Memphis, for one, opened a savings account to safeguard her four children--Mollie, 10, Dicey, 12, Adeline, 13, and Leth, 14—during hard times.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Memphis Office to Mr. Williamson, 25 Nov. 1865, SRTN, r. 17; R. A. Bryant and Mary Richardson, Contract, 1 Jan. 1866, SRTN, r. 21; D. D. Holmes to Clinton B. Fisk, 15 Jan. 1866, RACTN, r. 10, RLR, G-M.

<sup>19</sup> Contract with D. W. A. Harris, 30 Aug. 1865, RACTN, r. 21; Julia Song, no. 74, Registers of Signatures of Depositors in Branches of the Freedmen’s Savings and Trust Company, 1865-1874, Memphis, r. 24, National Archives, Washington, D. C., hereinafter cited as Registers of Signatures, Memphis (microfilm).

Struggling to make ends meet, other single mothers apprenticed out their children, but in many cases they made every effort possible to keep the family intact. Unable to support her young boy and girl, Nancy Jane Mask of Hardeman County gave them up to a childhood of apprenticeship, but in so doing, refused to separate them. Sam and John Sadler (ages 8 and 5) of Smith County also lived without their mother, but at least they, too, had each other's companionship. Only children, however, would be separated not only from their mother, but in many cases from the black community. But for children such as Virginia Ann Shirley of Shelby County, being torn from the freedman community did not necessarily mean being separated from the family, for they were hired by their white fathers.<sup>20</sup>

Single black fathers, too, had difficulty providing for their children during Reconstruction. The fathers were generally able to strike better deals, however. Not only was master Joseph Wilkes of Hardeman County to abide by the apprenticeship code of Tennessee—feeding, clothing, and providing a basic education for the child—he also promised to give Stephen Fentress's daughter one pair of shoes and stockings as needed, “treat her humanely, and see that she is well cared for.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Apprenticeship contracts between Nancy Jane Mask and James Pybup, 15 May 1866, Mary Sadler and Jesse Beasley, 10 Feb. 1866, Harriet Green and John Shirley, 16 Nov. 1865, RACTN, r. 20.

<sup>21</sup> Apprenticeship contract between Stephen Fentress and Joseph Wilkes, 30 Jan. 1866, RACTN, r. 22.

But not all parents did their best to provide for their children; a few left them to fend for themselves. The abandoned were treated as orphans by Bureau agents, who typically placed them in temporary care until a permanent home was found. Deserted children had only the Bureau to look out for them, negotiate apprenticeship terms, and ensure that white employers abided by their contract.<sup>22</sup>

Bureau agents diligently sought respectable whites to be the masters of black apprentices. Children as young as three and as old as twenty were apprenticed to whites until they reached adulthood. For the very young, the Bureau required prospective employers to present letters of recommendation proving that they were not only humane but also able to support an apprentice. Many former slave owners seeking apprentices hastened to assure Bureau agents that they had never mistreated slaves. Especially for younger apprentices, agents searched sometimes as long as six months for a suitable master. Even when black parents struck apprenticeship deals directly with whites, the Bureau still had the final word. Contracts were not binding until a Bureau officer was assured that the freedmen had not been taken advantage of and that the child would be properly cared for.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Apprenticeship contracts between Julius Johnson and Paralee Johnson, 23 Dec. 1865, and Ginny Coburn and G. L. Coburn, 10 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 20.

<sup>23</sup> Memphis Office to Mr. Williamson, 25 Nov. 1865, SRTN, r. 17; attachments of Julius Johnson, Thomas Henner, and Jonathan Sharp, apprenticeship of Samuel Adams to



Agents looked for homes in which the apprentice would not only be treated humanely but also taught properly. Because agents deemed many Tennessee whites unwilling to teach, or incapable of teaching, proper values, they often delayed the placement of black orphans with masters. Agents hoped to find homes that fostered the “moral and mental improvement” of the children--meaning an environment that inculcated Victorian values. In 1865 and 1866, before the establishment of a public school system in the state, many whites could not afford to send even their own child to school. But even if it was affordable, the education of freedmen, many white Tennesseans believed, was unnecessary and undesirable, for there must always be a laboring class. An industrial education could be as beneficial as a formal one, but working in a primarily agricultural state, Bureau agents had difficulty finding whites who could teach apprentices a useful trade other than farming. Above all, agents wanted children to be placed with masters who would rear them to be good citizens: patriotic, educated, and moral.<sup>24</sup>

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Bedford Pyles, 21 Dec. 1865, RACTN, r. 20; Joel B. Smith to C. B. Fisk, 26 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 17; R. P. Haley to C. B. Fisk, 12 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 10, RLR, G-M; apprenticeship of Sally Gordon to William Berry, 9 July 1866, RACTN, r. 20.

<sup>24</sup> R. Caldwell to C. B. Fisk, 28 Feb. 1866, J. J. Holloway to C. B. Fisk, 23 Feb. 1866, James Ware to J. E. Jacob, 28 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 17; Petition to “The Benevolent and Philanthropic Friends of Freedmen,” 16 Oct. 1865, AMATN, r. 1.

Some children were apprenticed to Freedmen's Bureau agents, perhaps because the agents had difficulty finding them proper guardians or because the age of older children such as James Jackson (16) and Della Roberts (14) made them unattractive to most white employers. In any case, these teenage orphans worked for Bureau agents and, in essence, labored for the federal government. The Bureau's Dickson County office was one that regularly apprenticed orphans. No doubt these children received what agents deemed instruction in a profitable trade.<sup>25</sup>

At other times, Bureau agents and missionaries tried to find black masters for children. But children could not be bound to just any freedmen. A true friend of the freedmen, agent and chaplain John Laurence searched for blacks or whites who would treat apprentices well. A man with high standards, he was often disappointed; in a typical month he was able to apprentice only three young blacks.<sup>26</sup>

Using the network of regional and state offices, Bureau agents also found masters for children in other states. Not a few young blacks from North Carolina were apprenticed to Tennessee whites; some served through the rest of their childhood, others

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<sup>25</sup> Apprenticeships of James Jackson to A. P. Hicks, Della Roberts to A. Marsh, 14 Apr. 1866, RACTN, r. 20.

<sup>26</sup> John Laurence to J. E. Jacobs, 28 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 17; Memphis Office to Mr. Williamson, 25 Nov. 1865, SRTN, r. 17; R. P. Haley to C. B. Fisk, 12 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 10, RLR, G-M; Memphis Office to General Fisk, 15 Jan. 1866, RACTN, r. 5.

served temporary terms of one to two years. Many children from western Tennessee worked for white farmers in neighboring Arkansas and Mississippi, who commonly apprenticed anywhere from four to fifteen Tennessee children. This was a common experience for young blacks from Memphis and Shelby County. Many of these children had no doubt migrated with their parents to Memphis during or right after the war in search of freedom and opportunity only to be returned to their former master. Their parents either had died or decided that a rural apprenticeship offered their children more opportunity and security than life in a bustling and violent town.<sup>27</sup>

More than a few black apprentices, however, stayed with their former owner. All across Tennessee during the immediate post-war months, male and female orphans were being apprenticed to their former owners: Isaac Bell (13) worked for Elisha Bell of Dickson County, for example, and Ellen Jones (9) for Paul T. Jones of Hardeman County.

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<sup>27</sup> Apprenticeship of Hezekiah Huntley to W. A. Barner, 25 Dec. 1866, [www.freedomensbureau.com/northcarolina/indentures.html](http://www.freedomensbureau.com/northcarolina/indentures.html); apprenticeships of Edwin Lewis, George Sims, Margaret Harris, Nancy Sims, Henry McNeal, James Taylor, Thomas Vaultz, Charles Ayers, and John Ransom to J. H. McNeal, 10 Nov. 1865, apprenticeships of Francis Wall, Edward Mitchell, George Johnson, Rachel Gibbs Scanlan, Angeline Gibbs Scanlan, Peter Frank, George Miller, William Brown, Henrietta Scanlan, Sara Gibbs Scanlan, Foster Miller, and Horace Scanlan to W. E. Scanlan, 8 Nov. 1865, and Joanna Nelms, Clinda Nelms, Sandy Nelms, and Calvin Nelms to Kate Nelms, 20 Nov. 1865, [www.freedomensbureau.com/Tennessee/contracts/shelbyindentures.html](http://www.freedomensbureau.com/Tennessee/contracts/shelbyindentures.html).

Not only orphans but many children with parents never left the place where they had toiled and played as slaves. Alone, too young to travel, and too ignorant to be aware of other options, young Joseph and Alexander Irvin of Madison County stayed on their master's farm after the war. Some, including Susan and Polly Brown also of Madison County, however, were taken advantage of by former owners; fortunately, the Bureau soon annulled their indentures.<sup>28</sup>

Little changed in the relationships and daily life of many apprenticed to their former masters. While apprenticeship contracts varied to some extent from household to household and county to county, in general black children were expected to be obedient servants completing tasks equivalent to those in slavery. The vast majority of apprentices, for example, performed farming and housekeeping chores and vowed to "faithfully serve" and obey their master's commands. In Hardeman County, children were obligated to be "in all respects" subject to the "authority and control" of the master. In most counties, apprentices were expected to work hard, inform the master of those

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<sup>28</sup> Apprenticeships of Isaac Bell to Elisha Bell, 6 Feb. 1866, Ellen Jones to Paul T. Jones, Jackie Pullin to Fayette J. Pullin, 12 Dec. 1865, and Edmund Crisp to E. C. Crisp, 22 Dec. 1865, RACTN, r. 20; Regosin, Freedom's Promise, 124; apprenticeships of Joseph and Alexander to John Irvin, 5 Jan. 1866, Susan and Polly to Milton Brown, 6 Jan. 1866, 5 Sep. 1866, Adam to James Vann, 4 Apr. 1866, and Santun, Lydia, Green, and George to Josephus Perkins, 7 May 1866, in Jonathan Kennon Thompson Smith, Freedmen's Labor Contracts, Madison County, Tennessee 1866-1867 (n.p., 1996).

who did not, and report those who threatened white authority or well-being. As many contracts stated, an apprentice should “do no damage to his master, nor willfully suffer it to be done by others.”<sup>29</sup>

Even if many young freedmen continued living with their former owners, some were lucky enough to be able to interact with their siblings on a daily basis. It was never certain that siblings could stay together. Not everyone was willing to provide for an apprentice, and it was even harder to find a master willing to care for a set of siblings. The apprentice indeed labored for his or her employer, but he or she was generally a financial liability until twelve years old. Yet agents and parents still found paternalistic whites in the South. Even if children had to be separated from them, black parents were just glad that they were able to grow up together. The parents of Davey, Hannah, and Easter Powell, for example, made it possible for them to farm for their former owner, W. J. Powell of Hardeman County. Thanks to the efforts of Bureau agents, even some orphaned siblings stayed together: Robert and Della Roberts of Dickson County were apprenticed to the same employer and thus were able to keep intact what was left of their family.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See apprenticeship contracts of Dickson, Dyer, Hamilton, Hardeman, Madison, Rutherford, and Shelby counties, RACTN, r. 20, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Apprenticeships of Robert and Della Roberts to A. Marsh, 14 Apr. 1866, Davey, Hannah, and Easter Powell to W. J. Powell, 22 Jan. 1866, Mary Gordon to William Berry, 9 July 1866, Hamilton County, RACTN, r. 20; apprenticeships of Santun, Lydia,

Apprentices were supposed to learn Victorian values while laboring for their masters, many or most of whom were former slave owners who, in the eyes of many abolitionists, had not too long ago fostered a lifestyle of laziness and hedonism among the slaves. Bureau agents and missionaries believed masters assumed a new responsibility to teach proper morality once they hired young apprentices; in fact, they thought the contracts also taught white employers how to act correctly in a society of wage earners. An agent in Rutherford County even expected masters to take apprentices to church every Sunday and provide them with an extra set of clothes suitable for public worship. Not only were apprentices to work hard and obey employers, they were also to avoid what agents and missionaries considered sinful behavior that supposedly undermined thrift and diligence. In some districts, including Dickson County, indentured children were forbidden to play cards, dice, or any unlawful game, or “haunt or frequent taverns, tippling houses, or gaming houses.”<sup>31</sup>

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Green, and George Perkins to Josephus Perkins, 7 May, 1866, in Smith, Freedmen’s Labor Contracts; apprenticeships of Lucy, Leonidas, Ellen, Napoleon, and Emma McNeal to Ezekiel McNeal, 20 Dec. 1865, [www.freedmensbureau.com/Tennessee/contracts/hardimanindentures.html](http://www.freedmensbureau.com/Tennessee/contracts/hardimanindentures.html).

<sup>31</sup> Vily Craddock, [?] Dec. 1865, SRTN, r. 58, ES; apprenticeships of Guy Smith, Rosa Spence and John Spence, 14 May 1866, Harriet Green to John Shirley and wife, 16 Nov. 1865, Rosella Jackson to Willis Jackson, 5 July 1866, and Frederick Harlin to James Jones, 5 May 1866, RACTN, r. 20.

Young apprentices were also supposed to learn to read and write and do simple arithmetic ("to the Rule of Three"), enabling them to be good citizens in a republic and independent workers in a free market. Virtually all contracts included some educational requirement, for Bureau agents felt strongly about this. More than likely, many apprentices never left the master's premises, or did so only for a short time, to receive the education promised them, for there was no required level of literacy to be attained. Most whites knew enough to provide a basic education, and in some cases children learned how to read and write in Sunday school, thus making it unnecessary to send them to school during the work week.<sup>32</sup>

Apprenticeships manifested certain gendered differences. At the end of their service, males were given approximately \$40 in clothes and \$100 in cash to start their adulthood while females were given outfits valued at approximately \$20-25 and \$75 in cash, a distinction reflecting the fact that boys worked three years longer than girls. What is more, females could more readily than males persuade masters to annul apprenticeships. Frequently around the age of fifteen, girls expressed their desire to be bound in matrimony instead of indenture. Some, like Harriet Chester of Madison County, confidently approached their master, asking him or her to dissolve their apprenticeship contract. In some cases the request, although illegal, was granted. No

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<sup>32</sup> See apprenticeships in RACTN, r. 20, 21, especially Bedford Pyles to James M. Pyles, 21 Dec. 1865.

doubt because their labor was considered more valuable, males rarely succeeded in shortening their term of service.<sup>33</sup>

From county to county there were different gendered work expectations. Boys and girls in Shelby and Madison counties, to name only two, were asked to “perform such work as is customary on a farm or plantation.” Working under such vaguely phrased contracts, boys and girls may have performed gendered work, but it is likely that both sexes carried out similar tasks. In many counties, such as Dickson and Dyer, boys were expected to farm while girls were expected to perform housekeeping chores and in some cases to farm, too. But in Hardeman County, most boys and girls contracted both to keep house and farm. They may have carried different work loads, but in such counties there was no gendered division of labor. In fact, some girls learned only the “profitable trade” of farming. Although agents and missionaries taught children Victorian gendered values of work and home, in some places it was impossible to implement them, for rural life still necessitated a certain equality of work.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Eliza Jane Oates to Fanny Oates, Ellen Grove to J. W. Grove, and James Boyle to Thomas Boyle, 29 Dec. 1865, and George Bowling to J. M. Bowling, 1 Jan. 1866, RACTN, r. 21; Harriet Chester to Robert Chester, 2 Nov. 1868, in Smith, Freedmen’s Contracts.

<sup>34</sup> See the apprenticeship contracts of Dickson, Dyer, Hardeman, Madison, and Shelby counties in RACTN, r. 20, in particular, Hannah Powell and Easter Powell to W. J. Powell, 22 Jan. 1866.



Scholars have argued that white masters tended to prefer older, male black apprentices because they were more profitable. However, the evidence for Tennessee does not bear this out. Across Tennessee, there was no overwhelming tendency among whites to hire black children twelve or above. From 1865 to 1869, whites in Hawkins County (East Tennessee) apprenticed 15 black twenty-year-olds, 10 nine-to ten-year-olds, and 13 age eight and under. A sample of eighteen Hardeman County (West Tennessee) apprenticeship contracts reveals that only 3 black apprentices were age twelve or above, that 9 were between ten and twelve, and that 5 were below the age of ten. The apprenticeship contracts of orphans in Shelby and Hardeman counties are more evenly spread: 22 such apprentices were above age twelve, 37 were between ages ten to twelve, and 44 were below age ten. A sample of 103 apprenticeship contracts from Shelby County (West Tennessee) reveals that whites preferred the very young: only 11 were above age twelve, 33 were between ages ten and twelve, and 59 were below age ten. A small sample of contracts from Rutherford County (Middle Tennessee) reveals the same phenomenon: 3 black apprentices were above age twelve, 4 were between ages ten and twelve, and 4 were below age ten. Across Tennessee, blacks of all ages, as young as three and as old as twenty, orphaned or not, were apprenticed as farm laborers.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Rebecca Scott, "The Battle Over the Child," 104; Frankel, Freedom's Women, 138-43, Eugene Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World The Slaves Made (1974), 502-19; Miller, East Tennessee's Forgotten Children, Hawkins County; Dora Selby and M. A. Anderson, 16 Nov. 1865, RACTN, r. 20;

Girls were almost as likely as boys to be apprenticed by whites, except in East Tennessee. In each of the five sample counties the number of male apprentices outnumbered females, but not by much. In some counties, however, there is no question that whites preferred to hire boys. In Hawkins County (East Tennessee), for instance, there were 25 male apprentices and 13 female. But the disparity between the number of male and female apprentices in the western counties was less. Whites in Hardeman County hired 58 male apprentices and 49 female, while whites in Shelby County apprenticed more girls than boys: 58 female, 57 male.<sup>36</sup>

Girls and boys were from time to time mistreated as apprentices. One common violation of apprenticeship contracts was the excessive whipping of children. A Mr. Brown of Sumner County whipped his twelve-year-old apprentice mercilessly, according to the child's mother. But Brown claimed the punishment was proper. In the end, the annoyance of dealing with the Bureau forced Brown to annul the indenture. Boys and girls both endured the lash, but girls, especially older ones, had more to worry about:

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[www.freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/contracts/hardimanindentures.html](http://www.freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/contracts/hardimanindentures.html);

[www.freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/contracts/shelbyindentures.html](http://www.freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/contracts/shelbyindentures.html);

[www.freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/contracts/rutherfordindentures.html](http://www.freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/contracts/rutherfordindentures.html).

<sup>36</sup> [www.freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/contracts/hardimanindentures.html](http://www.freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/contracts/hardimanindentures.html);

[www.freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/contracts/shelbyindentures.html](http://www.freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/contracts/shelbyindentures.html);

[www.freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/contracts/rutherfordindentures.html](http://www.freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/contracts/rutherfordindentures.html).

rape. One fifteen-year-old named Jane Boyd was raped by her employer, L. W. Willis, while performing chores alone in the barn; at other times Willis followed Jane into the woods, where he had his way with her. One day, however, Jane courageously resisted Willis's attacks and, in her flight, decided to tell others the dark secret that she had kept for six months. For defending herself, Jane was whipped and kicked off the premises by Willis, who had also been recently reported for attempting to rape a white woman.<sup>37</sup>

Although often compelled to apprentice their children out of financial necessity, black parents still protected them when they could. In many places, the parents of apprentices lived nearby and visited their children. On these visits, they no doubt talked with them about their employers' treatment. Some single mothers appealed to the Bureau after learning that their apprenticed child was being abused. Mary Bascovil of Sumner County, for one, reported to Agent Barr that her child was being mistreated; after a Bureau investigation, the child was returned to her. Another woman complained to the Sumner County Bureau superintendent of education, David Hadley, that her child was treated no differently in freedom than in the days of slavery. Worried that the maltreatment would have a "serious . . . effect on the child," she asked Hadley to tell

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<sup>37</sup> S. B. F. C. Barr to C. B. Fisk, 29 May 1866, attachment to D. D. Holman to O. O.

Howard, 18 Sept. 1866, RACTN, r. 10, G-M.

Superintendent Fisk about the abuse, for she was reluctant to complain to the local agent, a longtime friend of the alleged abuser.<sup>38</sup>

Some children took it upon themselves to appeal to the Bureau for help. Claiming they were apprenticed against their will, several children in Memphis disputed the legality of their indentures (Tennessee law required that the apprentice consent to his or her indenture, as well as the parents and the master). These children found an advocate in agent G. E. Green, who expedited the filing of their grievances and ensured that their case was heard in court. Another time Green confirmed reports that a thirteen-year-old boy was bound illegally in the city. He asked the master, Mr. Long, to release the boy voluntarily before the Bureau made him do so.<sup>39</sup>

In other instances, whites treated their apprentices like part of the household. A young apprentice girl of McMinn County, however, found out while playing with neighboring children that whites other than her employers could be cruel. While his son held her at gunpoint, Ben Jenkins whipped the girl for “being impudent to his children.” Meanwhile, the girl’s protective mistress ran to defend her, only to be struck to the ground by Jenkins. After the husband came home to find his wife and young apprentice tending their bruises, he sought out Jenkins, who proved to be less of a physical match for

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<sup>38</sup> S. B. F. C. Barr to C. B. Fisk, 29 May 1866, David Hadley to C. B. Fisk, 17 May 1866, RACTN, r. 10, G-M; Cincinnati Daily Commercial, 11 Aug. 1865.

<sup>39</sup> G. E. Green to R. French, reports from Jan. 1867 to Jan. 1868, ES, RACTN, r. 5.

an incensed husband than a young girl and her mistress. In an ironic turn of events, Jenkins sued the girl's master for hitting him, prompting local Bureau agent T. E. Trotter to sarcastically remark, "Such is justice in McMinn County."<sup>40</sup>

By and large, however, black apprentices did not have to experience such traumatic incidents to experience the paternalism of their masters. Bureau records are indeed filled with accounts of outrages against freedmen and violations of apprenticeship contracts, but that is not the whole story. When all was well, little was reported by local agents or the freedmen: "No outrages on the freedmen of any kind have been reported," remarked sub-assistant commissioner of Knoxville in 1868, "and harmony and quiet prevail." Apprenticeships, no doubt a means of exploitation for some whites, were also considered paternalistic relationships by many whites. While apprenticeships generally benefited whites, they could be burdensome, for whites found an indenture unprofitable until children reached the age of twelve to fourteen, when they could begin contributing substantial labor. Apprenticeships were typically arrangements of necessity for all involved: destitute black parents needed someone to care for their children, orphans needed a home, and whites needed labor and often felt obliged to take care of the

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<sup>40</sup> T. E. Trotter to J. R. Lewis, August 1866, Reports of Outrages, Chattanooga Sub-District, RACTN, r. 34.

destitute, many of whom had recently been their slaves. For many Tennessee whites, paternalism lived on after emancipation.<sup>41</sup>

In apprentice-master relations, whites generally assumed many parental responsibilities. As noted above, not only did white masters provide food, shelter, and clothing for young apprentices, but in many cases they were also the primary instructors of “proper morality.” These white masters, not the parents, oversaw the black apprentice’s year-by-year maturation into adulthood. Out of necessity, Jane Parrish of Madison County, a single mother of five, relinquished her parental duties to J. M. Woodland, who, in addition to feeding, clothing, and housing her children, assumed guardianship of their morals. Under the watchful eye of the Bureau, many white employers also promised to make sure young blacks received a basic education. For many black orphans, white masters were the only parent figure. In fact, many took the surname of their master or mistress: after being apprenticed by Robert Chester of Madison County, a young girl named Harriet, for one, was given the Chester surname. But whites could never truly accept blacks as a part of the family, a fact evidenced by the

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<sup>41</sup> Freedmen’s Affairs in Kentucky and Tennessee. Letter from the Secretary of War, Transmitting, in Compliance with House Resolution of the 1<sup>st</sup> Instant, Report of Brevet Major General Carlin, for the Last Six Months, Relative to the Condition of Freedmen’s Affairs in Kentucky and Tennessee (Washington, 1868), 36.

many apprenticeship contracts stipulating that black children were to “act as becoming a negro” and treat the master and his family with respect.<sup>42</sup>

In some ways the Bureau assumed parental roles for the orphaned, abandoned, and apprenticed children. The Bureau looked out for these children, the most vulnerable Tennesseans in a turbulent time. In custodial disputes between separated parents, Bureau agents cared not whether mothers or fathers were given custody, basing their decision solely on which parent could best provide for the child. Even if the mother married another man, agents frequently decided to give her custody of the child—especially if the new spouse made a reasonable wage. The Bureau often decided in favor of fathers, too. Although John Henry Williams of Somerville had lived with his mother for several years, agents granted custody of him to his absentee father, who was deemed a better provider because he made more money in Richmond, Virginia. Not surprisingly, the mother initially refused to give up John, forcing the Bureau’s intervention.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Jane Parrish to J. M. Woodland, 11 Jan 1866, RACTN, r. 20; Joseph Wilkes to Juliette Fentress, 30 Jan. 1866, RACTN, r. 22; Harriet Chester to Robert Chester, 6 July, 1866, 2 Nov. 1868, in Smith, Freedmen’s Contracts.

<sup>43</sup> J. J. Holloway to C. B. Fisk, 23 Feb. 1866, Memphis Office to [?] Williamson, 25 Nov. 1865, SRTN, r. 17; Samuel Howard to Superintendent of Nashville, Tennessee, 9 Mar. 1866, RACTN, RLR, G-M, r. 10; Polly Reaves to Memphis District Office, 17 Nov. 1866, RACTN, ES, r. 5.

Despite the Bureau's watchful eye on black children, many of its policies actually worked to undermine the black nuclear family. For one, the Bureau favored women over men in providing assistance. In her study of Reconstruction Virginia, historian Mary J. Farmer argues that Bureau policies were not gender-neutral: they "excluded only able-bodied black men from government relief." She identifies a state paternalism that influenced Bureau policies: agents believed that the government should take care of women, for maternal responsibilities frequently prevented them from finding work. Like the branch in Virginia, the Tennessee Bureau placed the burden of providing for the family squarely on the shoulders of black men, and in all matters generally offered females more assistance. Records indicate that the agency distributed considerably more rations to Tennessee women than men. Tennessee agents regularly sent in reports on the poor condition of mothers and their children (often labeled the destitute), yet in the same letter would express concern over husbands and fathers unwilling to work. In the eyes of the agents there should be no need for able-bodied men to apply for financial assistance. Mothers also had an advantage in claiming their children's bounties. The parents of a deceased single veteran were to receive any money still due him at death, but if the parents had separated the government gave all the money to the mother, assuming that the man could provide for himself, and if the case be, his new family.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Mary J. Farmer, "'Because They Are Women': Gender and the Virginia Freedmen's Bureau's 'War on Dependency,'" in Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller, eds., The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations (New York: 1999), 161-92;



If families could not obtain government benevolence, they expected the government at least to pay its debt to them. As of March 24, 1867, the Freedmen's Bureau was in charge of disbursing bounties to the families of fallen Union soldiers. Many of the widows and families of dead veterans were destitute. Moved by seeing such families living in poverty, some Bureau agents asked their district office to distribute rations to them. As will be recalled, the Bureau was hesitant to deliver rations after 1865, so many families struggled on as officials decided whether the circumstances demanded assistance.<sup>45</sup>

The bureaucratic process involved in securing bounties was painstaking for applicants in part because of the fraudulent claims of some freedmen and the regulations of the Bureau. Poring daily over piles of forms and letters and in many cases working alone, Bureau agents had to discern the rightful recipients. One common problem was when a deceased soldier's extended family claimed the bounty even though the soldier had left a wife and children. Already overworked, agents then had to establish whether the marriage was valid and process more forms, all of which delayed the disbursement of monies. In one case, the widow of Frank Gray and his nine children waited for almost

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Report of J. W. Groesbeck, 27 July 1866, William Fowler to C. B. Fisk, 22 June 1866, RACTN, RLR, G-M, r. 10.

<sup>45</sup> William Tracy to G. M. Bascom, 16 Feb. 1866, RACTN, RLR, E-S, r. 12; J. B. Coons to [?], 7 Oct. 1869, J. B. Coons to Fred S. Palmer, 27 Apr. 1870, SRTN, r. 48, v. 53.

two years before receiving a bounty. Other blacks simply lied about the death of their husband or son or about their relation to the deceased: although Anna Seay, for instance, claimed that her son had died, agents found out that he was alive and well. There were other complications, too. Although the Bureau was sympathetic to the plight of women, it wanted reassurance that female recipients upheld the values that the agency promoted. In a few cases, the Bureau withheld money from the families of “notoriously lewd women,” preferring to wait and give the money to the older children so they could provide for their younger siblings. Even if the application process went smoothly, some freedmen encountered further problems; one morning, agent Robert Galbraith walked into his office to find that someone had stolen an endorsed check and unsigned vouchers.<sup>46</sup>

Even if there had been no fraud, the process of bounty dispersal would still have been lengthy. Most claimants were illiterate, and even with assistance they frequently filled out forms incorrectly. They then had to submit corrected versions, which of course went to the bottom of the Bureau agent’s pile. The waiting time for reimbursement, once all pertinent material was submitted and approved, was eight to twelve months. Sometimes overworked or inept agents slowed the process. At other times overly scrupulous officials were at fault, refusing to approve a claim unless every line on every form was filled in flawlessly; some simply refused to look at incorrectly filled-out forms

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<sup>46</sup> W. P. Carlin to Assistant Adjutant General, 6 Mar. 1868, J. B. Coons to G. W.

Balloch, 6 Aug. 1868, W. H. Goodwin to J. B. Coons, 29 Aug. 1868, SRTN, r. 48.

and did not inform the applicants that a resubmission was necessary. Unfairly entwined in bureaucratic tape, one assertive mother in Columbia traveled to an agent's office to learn how to fill out her form correctly. Some claimants, tired of waiting, went over the local agent's head and appealed directly to Washington. Even when payment was approved and issued, once the application was filled-out correctly, there was no telling when the bounty checks would make it to the family. Meanwhile, the families of fallen soldiers struggled on.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, the Bureau undermined its goal of helping establish black nuclear families by refusing to pay transportation costs for some freedmen searching for relatives in Tennessee. If not for the determination of the assertive, many families would have remained separated. One woman, whose children were in the care of her former Tennessee master, was unable to pay travel costs from Arkansas to Tennessee, and her request for Bureau help went unanswered. Agent John Lawrence, a genuine advocate for freedmen, finally came to her aid, but others were not so fortunate. After their husbands died, many women asked and some demanded that the Bureau relocate them with their families so that they could better provide for their children. "I want you to manage to get transportation for me and my too [sic] little children," Ellen Henry wrote her Bureau

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<sup>47</sup> Isaac N. Agee to O. O. Howard, 10 Dec. 1867, J. B. Gooch to Joel B. Smith, 9 Mar. 1868, SRTN, r. 48; William Bascom to Henry Campbell, 8 Dec. 1865, SRTN, r. 60; J. B. Coons to Maria Rucker, 24 Nov. 1868, SRTN, r. 12; Special Order 118, Chattanooga Office, 1 Dec. 1868, RACTN, r. 16.

agent. “I will think it hard,” she continued, “if the government can’t furnish me transportation from hear [sic] home after my husband working for the government.” The Bureau refused to help her, and Henry had to find other means to join her family in East Tennessee.<sup>48</sup>

Children separated from their parents often lived with whites as apprentices. With much scrimping and hard work, many single parents were able to keep their family together, but economic circumstances often forced single mothers and fathers to apprentice out their young children. Once indentured, these children were still looked out for by their parents and the Bureau. Although its bureaucratic policies in many cases hindered the alleviation of poverty among some black families, the agency did its best to guard the children—especially orphans, many of whom lived as apprentices until adulthood.

After the war, little had seemed to change for black children separated from their parents. In many instances, as apprentices they performed the same tasks in the same places for the same whites as in the days of slavery. What was new was that the federal government sometimes intervened on their behalf and that they learned values and trades in preparation for an independent adulthood. For children, however, the best preparation was schooling.

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<sup>48</sup> Ellen Henry to Captain Hodge, 15 Jan. 1866, J. H. Gregory to Colonel Jacobs, 15 Feb. 1866, John Lawrence to J. H. Gregory, 24 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 10, RLR, G-M.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **MORAL RECONSTRUCTION: THE EDUCATION OF BLACK CHILDREN**

A free man was an educated man. That is what black Tennesseans believed even before being emancipated, and education was one of the things they worked hard to achieve after the war. Considering education the cornerstone of Reconstruction, Bureau agents and Northern missionaries established schools across Tennessee to prepare young blacks for freedom. Many white Tennesseans, on the other hand, opposed the education of black children. Although educators suffered many setbacks from 1865 to 1869, they laid a foundation for others to build on in future years. In Reconstruction Tennessee, these Humanitarian Radicals worked in Sabbath schools, Bureau and missionary day schools, and the public schools, also known as free schools. In all three, white and black instructors taught black children not only valuable skills but also moral principles that supposedly helped them adapt and live successfully as free people in a Victorian and free-labor society.

The operations of the Sabbath, Bureau and missionary day, and public schools were separate yet one. Although there were some publicly funded city schools, a statewide free-school system did not exist before 1867, but Sabbath and Bureau and missionary day schools continued after the passage of the common school law. In Sabbath schools missionaries (and many times the clergy and in some cases the laity) taught children and adults basic literacy and Christian doctrine. Sponsored by a benevolent association or their denomination, missionaries also started day schools,

where students paid tuition to receive more advanced instruction. In many instances, missionaries and blacks appealed to the Bureau for financial help; whether or not it granted money in specific cases, the agency monitored and endeavored to protect all schools in which blacks were taught. Except that they were funded by taxes, public schools operated similarly to Bureau and missionary day schools; their teachers still taught moral and scriptural lessons, and Bureau agents watched over them. Bureau and missionary day schools and public schools reinforced what was taught on Sunday. Therefore, the educational experiences of black children in Sabbath, Bureau and missionary day, and public schools are presented here as one story.

At the end of the Civil War, Bureau agents and Northern missionaries believed that educating freedmen was their primary task in the South. Without schooling for blacks, many Northerners believed, the war would have been fought in vain, for the freedmen must be properly equipped for freedom. Oliver O. Howard, national superintendent of the Freedmen's Bureau, considered it his Christian duty to educate the black children of the South. He and many other Northerners hoped to overcome the negative effects of slavery by preparing freedmen for their lives as independent and prosperous citizens. The behavior and attitudes of the Northern middle class would be the standard by which the freedmen's progress would be measured.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joe M. Richardson, Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890 (Athens, 1986); Henry L. Swint, The Northern Teacher in the South, 1862-1870 (Nashville, 1941), 36, 58; Robert C. Morris, Reading, 'Riting,

Even when the war still raged, the education of the freedmen occupied the thoughts of Humanitarian Radicals. According to historian Henry Swint, “The Yankee teacher entered the South on the heels of the soldier. Whenever a foothold had been secured by the Federal Army . . . philanthropic organizations sent out schoolmasters.” By the autumn of 1863, when Tennessee was mostly under Union control, missionaries had established freedmen schools in every major Tennessee town. When the fighting ceased in 1865, Bureau officers and missionaries combined forces to further the cause of black education. The Superintendent of Public Education in Tennessee, John Eaton, worked from 1867 to 1869 to ensure that the schools under his supervision taught the proper lessons to enable black Tennesseans to lead good lives. He hoped that black children would grow to be patriotic Americans, who practiced “Pure Protestant Christianity—the basis of American religion.”<sup>2</sup>

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and Reconstruction: The Education of Freedmen in the South, 1861-1870 (Chicago, 1981), 173; O. O. Howard, Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard: Major General United States Army, 2 vols. (New York, 1908), 1: 329-30.

<sup>2</sup> Swint, Northern Teacher, 3; Howard, Autobiography, 321-22; John Eaton Notebook, John Eaton Papers, hereinafter cited as JEP, Special Collections, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

But education and Protestantism were not forced on blacks. Freedmen as a whole burned with desire to attend missionary and Bureau day schools and evinced devotion to God and the Union. Time and again, visitors to Tennessee noticed that many blacks wanted an education above all else: J. T. Trowbridge, for one, observed that blacks in Chattanooga were “far more zealous” than whites about education. Some parents there skipped meals and did without good clothes in order to send their children to school. Black Nashvillians also made sacrifices and overcame many setbacks to gain an education for themselves and their children. Bureau agents likewise noted this hunger for education. According to agent J. J. Holloway of Somerville, the education of black children was the “universal desire of the Freedmen,” and parents would make almost any sacrifice for their children to get it. Blacks living in rural areas had to struggle particularly hard for educational opportunities. In Gibson County, some expressed their willingness to pay tuition or taxes for the establishment of schools. Desperately wanting to be educated, some children even defied their family’s wishes. Ann Matthews of Murfreesboro escaped from an authoritarian father who valued her labor more than an education. Young Ann eventually made her way to Nashville, where she immediately enrolled in a school.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> C. Stuart McGehee, “E. O. Tade, Freedmen’s Education, and the Failure of Reconstruction in Tennessee,” Tennessee Historical Quarterly 43 (1984): 381; John W. Alvord, Letters from the South Relating to the Condition of the Freedmen Addressed to Major General O. O. Howard (Washington, D.C., 1870), 32, electronic copy found at [www.dewey.library.upenn.edu/sceti/printedbooksNew/index.cfm?TextID=5468\\_0\\_S](http://www.dewey.library.upenn.edu/sceti/printedbooksNew/index.cfm?TextID=5468_0_S); J.



The freedmen did more than just dream about establishing schools. Even the hard economic times of Reconstruction could not diminish their enthusiasm, and generally black parents did all possible to ensure that their children received an education. To the astonishment of agent J. E. Jacobs, blacks in Chattanooga operated highly respected schools with only the aid of three black benevolent organizations. Some freedmen, such as John Tate of Clinton, bought land and a school building for fellow blacks and then assumed most of the school's operating expenses; in Tate's school only about a third of the enrolled students or their parents could afford to pay full tuition. All across Tennessee, many black parents pooled their capital to build schoolhouses, and some even saved enough to start private schools and compensate teachers. In Knoxville for example, a group of freedmen formed the Free School League of East Tennessee and taxed themselves monthly to pay for teachers' salaries and the construction and maintenance of schools. Although local blacks commonly built schoolhouses, not all could afford a full-time educator. A black man named Alfred A. Anderson, who eventually was salaried by the Free School League of East Tennessee, labored for almost

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J. Holloway to C. B. Fisk, 23 Feb. 1866, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Tennessee Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, r. 17, hereinafter cited as RACTN, National Archives, Washington, D. C. (microfilm); W. H. Stilwell to John Eaton, 29 Nov. 1867, JEP; Andrea Sutcliffe, ed., Mighty Rough Times, I Tell You (Winston-Salem, 2000), 100-101.

a year in Knoxville “with all diligence” yet without any assistance from the Bureau or any benevolent agency.<sup>4</sup>

Tennessee Bureau Superintendent J. R. Lewis was definitely ill-informed when he remarked that “The colored people have given but little aid in this [educational] work.” By 1868 he was aware of only nineteen private freedmen schools across Tennessee, but many more than that existed. Some were overlooked because they were tucked away obscurely in the countryside or in urban church basements. Furthermore, many blacks were reluctant to ask for monetary aid, for they preferred to be the responsible parties. Even so, freedmen had to humble themselves often and ask for financial help. In Lawrenceburg, for instance, blacks rented a school building for approximately 50 to 75 students, yet without Bureau assistance could not pay for the necessary repairs. Even where blacks had made little progress in establishing schools, some Bureau agents, such

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<sup>4</sup> J. E. Jacobs to Clinton B. Fisk, 12 Mar. 1866, J. P. Lewis to C. B. Fisk, 29 June 1866, Selected Records of the Tennessee Field Office of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872, r. 38, hereinafter cited as SRTN, National Archives, Washington, D. C. (microfilm); John Tate to John Ogden, 1 Dec. 1865, Robert Hamilton to L. L. Josselin, 2 Apr. 1865, John Ogden to J. M. Walden, 26 Aug. 1865, John N. Schultz to John Ogden, 28 Sept. 1865, American Missionary Manuscripts, Tennessee, r. 1, hereinafter cited as AMATN, Amistad Research Center, Dillard University, New Orleans (microfilm); Knoxville Whig, 2 May 1866; annual report of Fred S. Palmer, 1866, RACTN, r. 11, N-S.

as A. L. Dean in Clarksville, praised them for doing “exceedingly well under the circumstances” and criticized colleagues for rushing to judgment.<sup>5</sup>

The aid given for the education of black children by white Northerners and the Bureau was substantial. Throughout 1865 and 1866 religious and government agencies worked together to start freedmen schools in Tennessee, and in the eyes of many black and white Tennesseans, the work of the national government and that of the Northern missionaries was one. With the approval of Congress, Bureau Superintendent Clinton Fisk ordered his agents in Tennessee to work closely with religious and benevolent agencies in aiding the freedmen: the Bureau would help build and protect schoolhouses while the agencies provided teachers and paid their moving costs and salaries. In his study of the American Missionary Association in the postwar South, Joe Richardson claims that “almost every association college, normal, and secondary school was partially built with Bureau funds.” Richardson further concludes that the federal agency gave the AMA approximately \$300,000 for its work, and if “transportation, rentals, salaries paid to those who were employed jointly by the Bureau and the AMA, and property deeded to

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<sup>5</sup> J. A. Puckett to C. B. Fisk, [n.d.], RACTN, r. 11, N-S; O. O. Knight to D. Burt, 10 Dec. 1867, SRTN, r. 55; A. L. Dean to J. C. McMillan, 24 Feb. 1868, SRTN, r. 8; J. R. Lewis to O. O. Howard, 10 Oct. 1868, RACTN, r. 16.

the association are added to construction costs, the total probably exceeds a half million dollars.”<sup>6</sup>

The Tennessee Bureau was heavily involved in freedmen’s education before the state created its public school system in 1867. All of Tennessee’s Bureau superintendents emphasized the importance of freedmen’s education; Superintendent Lewis, like Fisk, considered it his “most important work.” Congress allotted \$25,000 annually to the Tennessee branch for building and repairing schools, and authorized its agents to use seized Confederate property. As early as July 1865, black children attended Bureau schools in Chattanooga and Memphis and learned from teachers who were on the agency’s payroll. Although blacks supported schools as much as possible, at times the Bureau was the only thing keeping freedmen schools open. Some black communities, such as the one in Columbia, constantly needed financial aid. Blacks may have saved enough money to construct a schoolhouse, but many could not afford to rebuild it if it was burned to the ground. Agents did their best to protect the freedmen schools from vengeful whites and came to the rescue in other ways, too, such as buying lumber and glass to repair storm-damaged schoolhouses.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamations of the United States of America, December 1865-1867 (Boston, 1868), 176; Special Order no. 134 ½, Office of Clinton B. Fisk, 30 Aug. 1866, RACTN, r. 16; Richardson, Christian Reconstruction, 83-84.

<sup>7</sup> J. R. Lewis to O. O. Howard, 10 Oct. 1868, Special Order no. 6, Chattanooga Office, 7 July 1865, O. O. Howard to J. R. Lewis, 26 Nov. 1866, RACTN, r. 10; Special Order no.

The Bureau's financial assistance came, however, with strings attached. Blacks had to prove themselves trustworthy and promise that any money given would be well spent. Agents of benevolent and religious associations did not escape interrogation either. The Bureau demanded proof that donated funds supported viable projects. For instance, in 1867 Superintendent W. P. Carlin withheld money from an orphanage desiring to start an industrial school until he learned that there would be at least ten to fifteen pupils. On another occasion, Carlin sent subordinates to meet with Methodist Bishop C. P. Gunland to determine what materials were actually necessary for the construction of freedmen schools and to ensure that the work was done efficiently. For the building of schools, some Bureau agents required black Tennesseans to provide partial payment in advance; one black congregation in Middle Tennessee had to raise \$400 before D. Burt, superintendent of Bureau education in Tennessee, provided the remaining \$300.<sup>8</sup>

Some missionaries were infuriated over what they perceived as the Bureau's parsimoniousness in dealing with a population in great need of relief. E. O. Tade in Memphis considered the local Bureau office "a poor miserable broken reed—worse than

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161, Office of J. R. Lewis, 18 Oct. 1866, RACTN, r. 16; John Ogden to C. B. Fisk, 31 Dec. 1865, RACTN, r. 11.

<sup>8</sup> [?] to Nashville Office, 1 Feb. 1867, C. P. Gunland to Nashville Office, 21 Jan. 1867, [?] to Nashville Office, 2 Feb 1867, RACTN, r. 5.

nothing,” for it had “not furnished a cord of wood for the schools under the immediate care of its own appointed government.” What is more, Tade’s schools suffered at the hands of federal soldiers. Twice during the winter of 1866, soldiers stormed in, stealing stoves and benches and vandalizing other property. “Not by report or green-eyed prejudice, but by actual sight,” Tade bore witness to the failings of the Memphis Bureau. Later, working in Chattanooga, Tade was more complimentary of the Bureau and its work.<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, freedmen could also turn to Northern religious agencies for financial aid. By 1870 the American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS) had dispatched twelve missionaries to Tennessee; they formed sixteen churches and ten schools from Bristol to Memphis, with a Sabbath and day school attendance approaching 2,600. Old and New School Presbyterians were also heavily involved in education, establishing church-affiliated schools in East and Middle Tennessee. Many of these Northern missionary associations continued their charitable work even after the establishment of public schools. In Clinton, for instance, black children attended a school in 1869 sponsored entirely by the New York Presbyterian Committee for Home Missions.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> E. O. Tade to M. E. Strieby, 6 Feb. 1866, AMATN, r. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Thirty-Eighth Annual Report of the American Baptist Home Mission Society Convened in the City of Philadelphia May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1870 (New York, 1870), 38-39, hereinafter cited as Thirty-Eighth ABHMS; Report, John Ogden to Clinton Fisk, 31 Dec. 1865, RACTN, r. 11; Charles D. McGuffey to John Eaton, 29 July 1869, JEP.

African American churches also played an important role in educating black children. In many cases, children from families unable to afford tuition or without access to a school learned how to read and write at church instead. All across Tennessee, black denominations established Sabbath schools for the young and old. By 1869 African American Baptists in Middle Tennessee alone had started 37 Sabbath schools with a staff of 275 teachers, serving 2,602 students. By 1870 in western Tennessee, 1,067 students were being taught by 75 teachers of the Brownsville Baptist Association of West Tennessee.<sup>11</sup>

According to missionaries and Bureau agents, black children were in great need of a Sabbath school education. Wandering the streets of the towns, many black children, in the opinion of the devout, not only distracted worshippers by playing all day on Sunday but also desecrated the Sabbath. These irreverent little ones should be in Sunday school, missionaries announced in newspaper advertisements for their outreach ministry. Sunday school students would learn not only the three R's but also correct religious

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<sup>11</sup> Minutes of the Second Annual Session of the General Missionary Baptist Convention of Tennessee Held at the First Colored Baptist Church, Memphis, August, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 1869 (Memphis, 1869), 16, hereinafter cited as Second GMBC; Minutes of the Third Annual Session of the General Missionary Baptist Convention of Tennessee Held at the First Colored Missionary Baptist Church, Clarksville, September 8, 9, 10, 11, & 12, 1870 (Nashville, 1870), 14, hereinafter cited as Third GMBC.

interpretations, not the “secesh doctrine” that formerly had trampled down “the promising scions and tender plants” of the South. The situation in the countryside of Tennessee was deemed even more troublesome, for black children there were considered even less civilized and more superstitious.<sup>12</sup>

The achievements of Sabbath school children were certainly influenced by the student-to-teacher ratio. The educational programs in some of the bigger churches had an ideal ratio: at First Colored Baptist of Nashville it was 11:1, at Providence Colored Baptist in Clarksville, 16.5:1, and at Middle Colored Baptist in Middle Tennessee, 12.5:1. In other schools, students must have received minimal attention: at Fort Pickering Colored Baptist in Memphis, 106 students were taught by a skeleton crew of 3; for classes numbering approximately 90, Woodlawn Colored Baptist Church in Montgomery County provided only 3 teachers; also in Montgomery County, Boiling Springs Colored Baptist’s small educational staff of 3 taught over 100 young scholars; and the 106 students at Bethel Colored Baptist in Giles County probably received little attention from their 2 overworked teachers. Attending a bigger school, therefore, did not necessarily result in a better education. In some of the smaller churches dotting the landscape of Tennessee, black children comprised only a handful of students: the student-teacher ratio at First Colored Baptist in Somerville was 6.6:1, at First Colored Baptist of Lebanon, 10:1, at Mount Zion Colored Baptist in Shelbyville, 8:1, and at Tunnel Hill Colored

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<sup>12</sup> E. H. Truman to Samuel Hunt, 28 June 1866, AMATN, r. 2; Knoxville Whig, 28 May 1866.



Baptist in Giles County, 8.3:1. If small Sabbath-schools (40 or fewer pupils) had at least one trained teacher, black children no doubt achieved a measure of literacy. But it was more difficult for blacks and denominational leaders to attract competent teachers to unknown places than to the prestigious and prosperous churches in the larger towns, such as the First Colored Baptist Church of Memphis and that of the same name in Nashville.

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A typical Sunday for young churchgoers started with morning Sunday school. Congregating outside the church around 9:30 A.M., youngsters heard teachers singing hymns such as “Sweet Hour of Prayer” and “Rock of Ages” as a call to worship. Once assembled in the sanctuary, the children listened to and repeated verse by verse the scripture reading of the day. They then departed to their respective fifty-minute-classes. In large churches, children attended classes with peers of the same age and scholastic ability. At E. O. Tade’s Lincoln Chapel in Memphis, forty to fifty “infants” (more accurately described as toddlers) were enrolled in the “Busy Bee” class, where they mostly recited and memorized catechisms and verses. A much smaller class, the “Stewards,” ranging from three to ten students on any given Sunday, was capable of following advanced instruction. Teenage boys and girls at Lincoln Chapel attended sexually segregated classes. The girls in Mrs. Tade’s “Ladies class” attended Sunday

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<sup>13</sup> Third GMBC, 14; Second GMBC, 16.

school more regularly on the whole than any other class. The boys' class regularly discussed such matters as the need for workers in the field of souls.<sup>14</sup>

Many other churches held Sabbath schools between the morning and evening services. Young attendees of these churches spent practically all of Sunday attending classes, worshipping, and eating on the grounds of the neighborhood church. Children did exactly that at Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Knoxville. Students attended morning worship at 10:50 A.M., ate dinner afterward, assembled for Sabbath School at 2:00 P.M, and took a short break before coming back for evening services. Some churches, such as the Logan Chapel American Methodist Zion Church of Knoxville, had two Sabbath school sessions, one in the morning and one after dinner.<sup>15</sup>

Many children were convinced that regular church attendance was the best way to become educated. After the morning reading and writing lessons, many adults with “no particular interest” in the sermon left before the worship service. To encourage church attendance, Tade included reading and writing lessons in his evening services. The young Sunday-night worshippers demonstrated not only a higher level of literacy but also a bit of arrogance. They called morning-only worshippers “visiting friends” and treated them as second-rate students and Christians.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> E. O. Tade to M. E. Strieby, 6 Feb. 1866, AMATN, r. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Knoxville City Directory, 1869.

<sup>16</sup> E. O. Tade to M. E. Strieby, 6 Feb. 1866, AMATN, r.2.

In Sunday school, black children were taught that they and their parents needed spiritual reform and that they were to be a beacon in a world of spiritual darkness. To begin with, students were to abstain from tobacco and alcohol. They heard countless lessons describing how liquor and tobacco use led to abuse, which undermined wisdom, decency, and “the finer feelings of [blacks’] nature.” That was only the beginning of personal reformation. The young were also admonished to shun exuberant worship. Missionaries deemed ardent worship uncontrolled and unseemly and therefore displeasing to God. Children also were taught that they were the great hope for the future of genuine Christianity and patriotism and that they should shine their Christian light everywhere. They could start by upholding doctrinal truths in the home when parents would not.<sup>17</sup>

Children also studied from texts carefully chosen for them. The Baptists of West Tennessee, in particular, were concerned that students learn only the “true” faith and reject such heresies as baptismal regeneration and infant baptism and sprinkling. In Germantown, some criticized the language of the catechisms. For instance, one catechism read thus:

Q: In what condition was Christ born when he became a man?

A: In a low condition.

Q: What was the low condition?

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<sup>17</sup> C. A. Crosby to C. S. Crosby, 1 May 1866, AMATN, r. 2; Thirty-Eighth ABHMS, 15.

A: He was born of a mean woman, in a stable, and laid in a manger.

Baptists were concerned that young children reading this would imagine Mary as a vicious person, instead of someone without wealth and privilege. But Baptists were not alone in their concern over Sunday school curriculum. Students of every denomination learned scriptural and doctrinal lessons while learning to read and write. Alphabetic lessons, for instance, included stories of Bible characters. One basic lesson went thus: children first heard the teacher read, “B was a Chaldee, who made a feast” and then listened to a reading of Daniel 5:1-4, learning that Belshazzar was the person mentioned. Other ABC lessons focused on good manners: “I [Ishmael] was a mocker, a very bad boy—Gen. xvi. 24.” In some Sunday schools, children received a “Pocket Etiquette of the Ten Commandments” that included such lessons as “Always say, Yes, sir, No sir; use no slang terms; never enter a private place with your cap on; always offer a seat to a lady or an old gentleman.” Other lessons emphasized the importance of cleanliness: “Dirt was a necessity of slavery,” wrote L. Maria Child in The Freedmen’s Book, “and that is one reason . . . why freemen should hate it.”<sup>18</sup>

Sunday school teachers were supposed to practice what they taught. Their young disciples were to observe them as models not only of sincere piety but also of punctuality and preparedness. Most carried out these responsibilities faithfully. In some cases, students consulted with teachers individually and received personalized lessons based on

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<sup>18</sup> Tennessee Baptist 16 Nov. 1867, 17 Apr. 1869; L. Maria Child, The Freedmen’s Book (Boston, 1865; reprint, New York, 1968), 249-50.

their particular needs and interests. In most cases, students were expected to conform to the learning styles of the majority and think of themselves as part of the group instead of an individual. To be sure, students everywhere heard and read in their lessons biblical principles that supposedly helped them overcome moral limitations.<sup>19</sup>

In the morning worship service, black children heard the same Victorian and scriptural values reinforced. Young members of the six churches comprising the Pleasant Grove Missionary Baptist Association heard many sermons admonishing them to “be temperate in all things: eating, sleeping, drinking, and all other exercise and enjoyment.” In the churches of the General Missionary Baptist Association, young black Tennesseans learned that the Freedmen’s Bank was a valuable and trustworthy enterprise and that they should save their money and become productive citizens.<sup>20</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the Bureau and missionary day schools (both met on weekdays and were conducted mainly by missionaries) stressed the same moral and economic philosophies. Bureau superintendents across the South regarded schools as the cornerstone of Reconstruction and the means by which the negative effects of slavery could be undone. For many educators, academic success was secondary to properly socializing black children. As a result, the Bureau and missionary day schools were

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<sup>19</sup> Tennessee Baptist, 24 Apr. 1869.

<sup>20</sup> Minutes of the Pleasant Grove Missionary Association (n. p., 1868), 3; Second GMBA, 10-11.

agents of “white, bourgeois American standards.” Among the eleven goals delineated in John Alvord’s semi-annual reports were ones blending religious and Victorian values: schools were to ensure that black children became a “moral, virtuous, and Christian people,” to eradicate every “mean, low passion” from the hearts of little ones, and to teach young freedmen that they were not only responsible to their neighbors but also to “Him who is their Creator, Redeemer, and final judge.” The educators of Tennessee’s Bureau schools were expected also to teach young blacks “cleanliness, dress, home habits, social proprieties, use of furniture, preparation of food, and tasteful construction of dwellings.”<sup>21</sup>

A brief history of the common school system of Tennessee is needed before explaining further the educational experiences of black children. The first to be established in a former Confederate state during Reconstruction, it did well considering the circumstances in which it began its brief existence. According to Tennessee Bureau Superintendent W. P. Carlin, “Tennessee [was] in advance of the other States.” For three short years, public education offered black children and their parents hope for a better future.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> John W. Alvord, Seventh Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, January 1, 1869 (Washington, D.C., 1869), 60-62, 82-83, hereinafter cited as Seventh SAR; Ronald E. Butchart, Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen’s Education, 1862-1875 (Westport, 1980), 168.

<sup>22</sup> Seventh SAR, 41.

Legislation establishing public schools was enacted in 1867, although Humanitarian Radicals had advocated a state-supported school system as early as 1863. Using the research of the Committee on Education and Common Schools, which for two years conferred with leaders of public education in other states, Humanitarian Radicals persuaded fellow legislators to vote for a statewide system of public education on March 28, 1867. Among many objections, the most salient, according to W. Bosson, chairman of the Committee on Education and Common Schools, was that whites should not be taxed to educate blacks.<sup>23</sup>

During the statewide system's three-year existence, the number of black students increased each year. From 1867 to 1869, black children in East Tennessee comprised only a small part of the public school enrollment: in 1867, 13,349 out of 115,183 students in that region were black; in 1868, 12,854 out of 124,254; in 1869, 13,741 out of 129,243. Although the black population as a whole was relatively small in that region, from the beginning black and white school enrollment paralleled the black and white population there. West Tennessee's black student enrollment increased each year, and by 1869 the number of registered students roughly corresponded with the region's racial composition. In 1867, the blacks numbered 22,581 out of 81,600 students; in 1868,

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<sup>23</sup> John Eaton, Jr., First Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Tennessee, Ending Thursday, October 7, 1869 (Nashville, 1869), iii-v, hereinafter cited as First Report.

30,626 out of 103,942; and in 1869, 44,161 out of 102,801. Although Middle Tennessee provided an education for the largest number of black students and included the finest city systems, student enrollment there never equaled the ratio of the black and white population: in 1867, 36,420 out of 152,419 students were black; in 1868, 45,386 out of 181,965; and in 1869, 47,028 out of 186,681.<sup>24</sup>

Except for Knoxville in East Tennessee, the “capitals” of each grand division—Nashville in Middle Tennessee and Memphis in West Tennessee—supplied the highest number of black students in their region. In East Tennessee, Knox County schools led the way in 1867 with an enrollment of 1,271. In 1868, however, Hamilton County’s enrollment narrowly surpassed that of Knox (1,447 to 1,441); the lead stretched slightly over the next year (1,639 to 1,517). Each year, Davidson County schools, which included Nashville city schools, were rivaled only by Rutherford and Maury County schools; in 1867 Davidson County provided an education for 5,806 black students and Rutherford County, 3,927; in 1868, enrollment increased to 6,291 in Davidson County and 4,738 in Rutherford County. In 1869, however, Maury County surpassed Rutherford County (5,506 to 5,305), yet the student population was still less than that of Davidson (7,314). In West Tennessee, Memphis city and Shelby County educators taught the highest number of black students. In 1867 the enrollment of black students in Memphis (4,274) and Shelby County (4,084) represented more than a third of the region’s 22,581 black pupils. In 1868 the number of students in the two systems increased slightly to

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., xxxvii-xlii, cciii-ccv.



8,737 and comprised approximately 29 percent of the West's enrollment (30,626), and in 1869 the other sixteen counties' enrollment shrank to 21,080, leaving the decreased enrollment in Shelby County and Memphis (7,924) still in the lead (27 percent).<sup>25</sup>

During its existence, the public school system of Tennessee compiled a creditable record of accomplishments: one out of seven Tennessee children attended public school, a ratio rivaling that of some Northern states, according to John Alvord, and far surpassing those of the Deep South states. By 1869, according to John Eaton's records, 89,503 blacks were enrolled in a public school. But these students' educational opportunities were drastically curtailed after the Department of Public Instruction was discontinued in 1870. Little more than 10 percent of the black school-age population (12,391 students) was enrolled in any school in 1870; of the school-age population of whites, approximately a third (110,314) still attended school.<sup>26</sup>

In everything they did, students in public schools were exposed to free-labor values. Students embracing those values, for example, by "doubling their efficiency," received recognition and praise. John Eaton delivered speeches to students across the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Frances A. Walker, A Compendium of the Ninth Census (June 1, 1870), Compiled Pursuant to a Concurrent Resolution of Congress, and Under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior (Washington, D. C., 1873), 452-53; First Report, ccv; Fifth SAR, 47.

state, reminding them of the importance of time management: “Punctuality and regularity of habits will save you much in the future life. . . . Take care of the minutes, and the hours will take care of themselves.” Bureau teachers kept copious attendance records that noted punctuality: of the 6,810 black students, almost 4,500 usually attended school; and of those, 2,501 were considered “always punctual.” The consistently punctual were applauded, but the tardy were punished. In the Memphis school district, children who were “repeatedly tardy, without excuse” were suspended and could return to school only with the local superintendent’s approval. Unless absences were excused, public grammar and high school students missing more than three days and primary students missing more than four lost their seat to another child. Those at school were reminded that hard work not only helped them climb out of poverty but also allowed them to assist the less fortunate. From the first day, children were taught that literacy and numeracy guaranteed a better future. But to excel one must put forth great effort, as John Eaton reminded public school students: “There is no royal road to learning. Do not expect to ascend to the hill of science without climbing. . . . Seek perfection in each practice. . . . Do no duty by halves.” What cost them little as children, Eaton believed, would profit them much as adults.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> John Ogden to John Eaton, 24 Oct. 1868, Horace Andrews to John Eaton, n. d., JEP; First Report, xxxi; Child, Freedmen’s Book, 37; Paul David Phillips, “Education of Blacks in Tennessee during Reconstruction, 1865-1870,” in Carroll Van West, ed., Trials and Triumph: Essays in Tennessee’s African American History (Knoxville, 2002), 149, 152.

Students of the public and missionary day schools were immersed in religious teaching, too; those attending Sabbath and weekday schools just received a double portion. Pupils learned about the Kingdom of Christ, the value of prayer, and how Christ works personally in human lives. Children also read lessons that combined husbandry and Christianity; one lesson stated that the abuse of animals was a sin against God. Reading in their McGuffey readers, students were reminded that individual and national prosperity resulted from obeying the Scriptures. A “permanently prosperous man” did not break the Sabbath; nor were regular churchgoers found in a state of decadence.<sup>28</sup>

Good morality was seen as necessary not only to redeem individuals but also to mend a broken nation. According to educators across Tennessee, enlightening the masses was “the primary hope of the country,” and thus a large part of education was civic lessons. The right choice of textbooks, believed E. O. Tade, could inculcate “Patriotic . . . character,” and enable students to “serve the purposes of truth and progress.” Black students were taught that patriots were heroes and that being patriotic required one to perform good civic works and evince a devotion to the nation.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Child, Freedmen’s Book, 97-100, 123; William H. McGuffey, McGuffey’s New Sixth Eclectic Reader: Exercises in Rhetorical Readings with Introductory Rules and Examples (Cincinnati, 1867), 22-23, hereinafter cited as Sixth Reader.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Thomas to John Eaton, 5 Mar. 1870, E. O. Tade to Barnard and Barnum, 29 Nov. 1867, JEP.

But many students, especially the older ones, stubbornly defied their teachers and resisted instruction. The continued use of alcohol, tobacco, and profanity particularly troubled Northern teachers. Tennessee was infamous in the eyes of some Northerners for its “universal custom . . . of smoking, drinking, and dipping” and proved to be a difficult place to instill the value of temperance. Everywhere children went in Chattanooga they saw “colored customers” patronizing “low drinking saloons,” observed John Alvord. So youths were encouraged to join temperance societies, the two most prominent being the Band of Hope and the Vanguard of Freedom. Not only did male and female members pledge to abstain from alcohol, they also vowed not to touch tobacco or utter a profane word. Members also abjured the use of what teachers regarded as vulgar language, including such words as “fool,” “liar,” and “nigger.” But in some schools, alcohol use, and even abuse, remained a problem. James Byers of Tipton County was troubled by the “prematurely developed vice of liquor drinking” among his students. Before and after school, and even during breaks, they purchased whisky from a nearby store. According to Byars, considered “one of the most earnest and successful instructors” in Tennessee, student drunkenness made it very hard to maintain classroom order and decorum.<sup>30</sup>

A typical school day included much more than the teaching of values, however. Students memorized speeches, facts, and more facts. And black children heard many of

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<sup>30</sup> Alvord, Letters from the South, 29; Butchardt, Northern Schools, 162-63; Seventh SAR, 42; A. S. Mitchell to John Eaton, 18 Nov. 1867, JEP.

the same lessons again and again, for as teachers read in the McGuffey Eclectic Primer, “Repetition is necessary in instructing young children.” Teachers also employed music to teach many subjects, for they believed that blacks were a peculiarly musical race. But children learned that their preferred music was often regarded as too expressive and emotional; they were encouraged to adopt a more sedate and seemly style. After students had mastered the alphabet, they read short stories, which taught syntax and semantics. Meanwhile they learned how to properly inflect their voices and be expressive and articulate. As children moved beyond elementary instruction in English and mathematics, they accepted the challenge of more advanced classes, including geography, physiology, elementary algebra and geometry, composition and speaking, botany, mental and moral philosophy, chemistry, and United States history.<sup>31</sup>

The use of various texts, however, was believed to confuse freedmen and thwart the advancement of free-labor and Victorian values. From 1867 to 1869 this truly concerned superintendents of the Freedmen’s Bureau and the Department of Public Instruction, who worried that young freedmen were reading conflicting interpretations of history, Christianity, and government; only the standardization of texts guaranteed that the correct values would be taught and that children would march toward progress.

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<sup>31</sup> William H. McGuffey, McGuffey’s Newly Revised Eclectic Primer (Cincinnati, 1867), hereinafter cited as Eclectic Primer; John W. Alvord, Eighth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, July 1, 1869 (Washington D. C., 1869), 85, hereinafter cited as Eighth SAR; Sixth Reader; First Report, xxv-vi.

Although benevolent and denominational societies chose the texts for their schools from 1865 to 1867, the Bureau encouraged all to cooperate in creating a unified curriculum. The associational texts should not have worried Bureau officials, however. The Freedmen's Book by L. Maria Child, to use one example, described in great detail the negative effects of slavery and the positive influence of abolitionists while including biographies of successful and hard-working African Americans and lessons on the importance of good morality and hygiene. Nothing was particularly disturbing about any of McGuffey's readers either. Superintendent of public schools John Eaton nevertheless asked several local superintendents to review texts and recommend specific ones for statewide adoption. They concluded that the readers for black and white children alike should exhibit that "rare combination of sound morality with neatness of composition" and that history texts should be "destitute of that dry, prosy style in which most are written." Many teachers in East Tennessee, however, resisted efforts to standardize texts, preferring McGuffey's readers over Eaton's choice, Hillard's readers. Consequently, students in East Tennessee continued using McGuffey's readers; as E. O. Tade remarked, "Old friends part reluctantly."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> John Ogden to J. M. Walden, 26 Aug. 1865, AMATN, r. 1; John W. Alvord, Third Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, January 1, 1867 (Washington, D. C., 1868), 38, hereinafter cited as Third SAR; Child, Freedmen's Book; M. C. Wilcox to John Eaton, 3 Oct. 1867, A. E. Plume to Barnard and Barnum, 1 Nov. 1867, J. M. Alexander to Barnard and Barnum, 8 Nov. 1867, E. O. Tade to Barnard and Barnum, 29 Nov. 1867, JEP.

Standardized texts saved parents money and made the transfer of children from one school to another smoother. When black families moved, they often had to buy new books for children, and these texts many times focused on different objectives, or the same ones at a different pace. According to John Eaton, the abrupt change had a “disastrous influence upon scholarship.” Standardized texts furthermore cut costs in the Superintendent of Public Education’s office.<sup>33</sup>

All teachers, no matter their race, sex, or age, were supposed to be testifying Christians. Clinton Fisk demanded that teachers be “able Christian ones . . . with malice toward none, with charity for all. Yet with firmness for the right, marching on ‘in the word.’” Presbyterians wanted teachers who possessed the “peculiar spirit, and qualifications necessary to success in the field” and expressed disappointment in not finding many. AMA leaders also prized energetic yet practical teachers of any race or sex. Some Tennessee communities preferred white Christians, however. The presence of black teachers in Greeneville, some feared, would slow educational reconstruction because many whites there preferred to have no schools than to allow blacks to assume respected positions—even if they taught only black students. Prejudice appeared even among the ranks of what was considered humanitarian circles; the prejudice of some white instructors undoubtedly concerned John Eaton, whose thinking was influenced by

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<sup>33</sup> First Report, xxv-xxvi.

essayists claiming that racists denied the revolutionary and egalitarian teaching of Christ.<sup>34</sup>

Many young black Tennesseans were fortunate to be under the tutelage of genuinely humanitarian and hard-working white teachers. In Chattanooga E. O. Tade worked hard to ensure that his pupils studied in remodeled buildings. They saw him working at all hours, going without sleep and meals, and performing his tasks to the point of exhaustion. Tade's exertions were not unusual. Children of the Cumberland School in Nashville appreciated their two schoolmarm[s] for showing "energy and excellent, practical judgment," and for being "true, earnest, and consistent friend[s]." Older students in particular realized the sacrifices some teachers made on their behalf. In her last hour, a dying sixteen-year-old student called for her teacher, expressed to him her love for Jesus and Sabbath school, and thanked him for laboring among freedmen. When sincere and dedicated teachers died, the young eulogized them. Before J. G. McKee, a well-known and respected teacher in Nashville, was put into the ground, hundreds of sobbing black students attended a chapel service in his honor and then marched through Nashville in an impressive funeral procession. John Eaton predicted that all black

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<sup>34</sup> Clinton B. Fisk to George Whipple, 21 Oct. 1865, AMATN, r. 1; Third PCUSA, 23; Anna Hagar to Rev. Whipple, 18 Aug. 1866, AMATN, r. 2; Morris, Reading, 'Riting, and Reconstruction, 89-90.



children eventually would realize that their teachers laid the educational foundation on which national progress and reconciliation one day would rest.<sup>35</sup>

Black children learned also at the feet of black missionaries and preachers and teachers. From the beginning of Reconstruction, Bureau officials and denominational leaders had encouraged the employment of black teachers, for the profession not only provided employment to educated blacks but also gave young blacks models of good citizenship and scholarship among their race. Superintendent Clinton Fisk and Tennessee Bureau Superintendent of Education John Ogden promoted the employment of black teachers for expedient reasons, too: blacks helped meet the high demand for educators and worked for less than Northern whites. To satisfy the great need for teachers, especially in the rural areas, agents and missionaries selected advanced black students with “good moral character” and offered them courses that prepared them for teaching. Many graduates from normal schools, such as Fisk University in Nashville, did indeed return to rural Tennessee, for schools outside the towns were unattractive to most Northern teachers. Black children particularly admired teachers of their own race and

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<sup>35</sup> McGehee, “E. O. Tade,” 378-79; E. O. Tade to E. M. Strieby, 6 Feb. 1866, E. H. Truman to Samuel Hunt, 28 June 1866, AMATN, r. 2; Jason S. Travelli to John Eaton, Jr., 7 Oct. 1867, JEP; James McNeal, “Biographical Sketch of Rev. Joseph G. McKee, the Pioneer Missionary to Freedmen in Nashville, Tennessee,” in Historical Sketches of the Freedmen’s Mission of the United Presbyterian Church, 1862-1904 (Knoxville, 1904), 11, 13; John Eaton to E. O. Tade, n. d., JEP.

seemed to respond better to their instruction. According to John Alvord, children respected most of all the “former common field boys” who went back to their communities to teach.<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately, however, many children studied under incompetent teachers, black and white. In rural areas, many schools settled for almost anyone with a modicum of learning and the willingness to teach. Some of these teachers were woefully unprepared. For example, complaining to the Bureau about the delay in starting of school, one teacher wrote, “The reson is we are destitut of a floor in our Hous . . . the pupils have a ling way to come to School and the weather is very bad and for this resons I shal return this report blanke.” Some teachers were unable to understand communications from Bureau agents, and in some cases refused to prepare monthly reports out of frustration. Other children were undoubtedly taught by whites who inflated their education and humanitarianism. One applicant, for instance, remarked that he had never “teached,” but he believed that he could “larn niggers to read right smart.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Clinton B. Fisk to John Ogden, 4 June 1866, AMATN, r. 2; Second Annual Report on the General Assembly’s Committee on Freedmen of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, (Pittsburgh, 1867), 7, 12, hereinafter cited as Second PCUSA; Third SAR, 36; John W. Alvord, Ninth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, January 1, 1870 (Washington, D. C., 1870), 48, hereinafter cited as Ninth SAR.

<sup>37</sup> Phillips, “Education of Blacks,” 153-54.

But by and large, black children benefited greatly from attending Bureau and missionary day and public schools. In class, black pupils were earnest, seizing books gladly and learning rapidly. But children had to work hard to impress those agents with preconceived notions about race and intellect. In their estimation, black children were weaker than whites in “inventive power” and “abstract science.” But to their credit, agents still believed that with enough effort and determination black students could master any subject. In time, children impressed Bureau agents and proved that, all things being equal, they performed as well as white children. Some became proficient in such advanced subjects as Latin, algebra, and bookkeeping.<sup>38</sup>

The children furthermore pleased agents with their behavior in school. No matter the class size, freed children, with a few exceptions, were well-behaved. In Gallatin, one agent was deeply impressed by the 300 or more students who sat still and worked diligently for only three teachers. Across the state, other agents noticed that students avoided using vulgar language, were “neat and tidy,” and took care of their books and the “general appearance of the school.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> JoVita Wells, ed., A School for Freedom: Morristown College and Five Generations of Educators for Blacks, 1868-1985 (Morristown, 1986), 1-2; John W. Alvord, First Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, January 1, 1866 (Washington, D. C., 1867), 10-11, hereinafter cited as First SAR; Eighth SAR, 63.

<sup>39</sup> T. C. Wimble to C. B. Fisk, 28 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 17; Eighth SAR, 63; Seventh SAR, 42.

At the end of every academic term, students typically showcased their academic achievements in a recital, commonly called an exhibition. All students participated, not just the brightest, and thus these occasions were an indicator of a school's performance. In rented halls, the students recited speeches and poems and sang solos and chorus numbers for parents, patrons, and interested whites. Many observers came away impressed with the children's good behavior and display of knowledge.<sup>40</sup>

Not all school experiences would become fond memories, however. Many white Tennesseans remained hostile to the idea of freedmen schools, and some made life miserable for those who operated them. E. O. Tade in Chattanooga complained that missionaries lived a "dog's life, . . . hated, shunned, and despised," for their educational work. White or black, male or female, teachers faced trials, but men in particular worked amid physical threats. Some children witnessed teachers being dragged away from their homes or schools, beaten, and choked. In front of his students, William Newton of Somerville was stoned by white boys, whose threats and disruptions eventually provoked the deployment of federal troops. At his home in Lebanon, a white teacher was threatened by twenty-five night riders, but he bravely continued his work, thanks in great part to sympathetic neighbors who protected him. But protection was not enough in

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<sup>40</sup> Columbia Herald, 13 Aug. 1869; John W. Alvord, Sixth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, July 1, 1868 (Washington, D. C., 1869), 75, hereinafter cited as Sixth SAR.

some places: in Weakley County, where whites repeatedly voiced opposition to public education in general and freedmen's schools in particular, black teachers were intimidated into leaving; some were dragged from their boarding house and severely whipped. Many teachers lived in fear. Almira Stevens of Morristown, for one, trusted God to answer her daily prayers for safety like he did those of the Psalmist David: "In my distress I cried unto the Lord and he heard me."<sup>41</sup>

Teachers' problems in many cases affected black students. When a teacher was run out of town, black students had no instructor and could not attend school. Finding another to work in an inhospitable place was no simple task. Some blacks' academic year ended abruptly when teachers chose another occupation to make ends meet. Eventually even the most charitable teacher demanded compensation. W. F. Carter of Sparta, for one, needed "money very bad" and asked that the Department of Public Instruction send it to him "with all possible speed," for his overworked and unpaid staff understandably looked for employment elsewhere.<sup>42</sup>

At times school children were the victims of harassment that most agents blamed on lower-class, ignorant whites who were stirred up by racist demagogues. At a

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<sup>41</sup> McGehee, "E. O. Tade," 384, 386, 388; Phillips, "Education of Blacks," 161-62; J. R. Lewis to O. O. Howard, 10 Oct. 1868, RACTN, r. 16; Memphis Evening Post, 25 Aug. 1869; Alvord, Ninth SAR, 48; First Report, cliv; Wells, School for Freedom, 2-4.

<sup>42</sup> Howard, Autobiography, 378-79; W. F. Carter to John Eaton, 29 Mar. 1869, JEP.

Springfield school, children stopped studying to take shelter from young thugs pelting the schoolhouse with rocks. On other days there, pupils trying to concentrate on their studies were interrupted by shouted obscenities. Only after the posting of sentinels at the front door and on the grounds could the teacher resume his work.<sup>43</sup>

Not every white Tennessean was an enemy of public education and freedman schools. Addressing aspiring black educators at Fisk University, Governor Brownlow approved using federal troops and declaring martial law to protect freedmen schools. He advised blacks to be avid learners, but for their safety, not to purposefully provoke whites. Over time, some whites had a change of heart. Agents reported that perceptive planters realized that slavery was truly dead and that an educated workforce was useful in a free-labor society. The “better classes,” observed John Alvord, endorsed black education once they had seen its benefits. Risking retaliation from neighbors, some whites boarded missionary teachers, and some helped construct or rebuild schoolhouses. When whites in Clinton, for example, burned a school in January 1869, children saw whites and blacks working side by side to reconstruct it. Moreover, many whites came to appreciate the advantages of free schools, for they benefited poor whites along with blacks. Especially in East Tennessee, the initial resistance of whites evolved into an

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<sup>43</sup> John W. Alvord Fourth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen July 1, 1867 (Washington, D. C., 1867), 68, hereinafter cited as Fourth SAR; Howard, Autobiography, 375-76; W. H. Stillwell to John Eaton, 3 Dec. 1868, W. Bosson to John Eaton, 19 July 1869, D. B. Hagar to John Eaton, 18 Nov. 1869, JEP; McGehee, “E. O. Tade,” 386.

acceptance of public education. From Bristol to Chattanooga, agents claimed, East Tennesseans championed the merits of schools for everyone. This was true, too, in many places in Middle Tennessee. As E. McKinney put it, “Everybody nowadays is in favor of free schools.” And as J. P. McKee of Davidson County observed: “The system is gaining the confidence of the people.” In 1869 John Eaton received petitions from the public endorsing taxation for schools and asking him to do his best to keep the Department of Public Instruction open.<sup>44</sup>

Educators and students had more to worry about than whether whites approved of their educational efforts: money, for one thing. In many places schools were closed in mid-term because administrators were unable to pay maintenance costs, even after extensive fundraising efforts. Educators sometimes managed to find free accommodations, such as a church building, but they could not always depend on remaining in them, for they were subject to the whim of the owner. Children and their teachers who were turned out of their building by the owner sometimes wound up in a state of vagabondage, searching for a permanent location. As J. P. McKee, a Presbyterian missionary teacher in Nashville, recalled: “We were tossed from place to

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<sup>44</sup> Dennis K. McDaniel, John Ogden, Abolitionist and Leader in Southern Education (Philadelphia, 1997), 38; Fred Palmer, Summary of Reports, r. 11, RACTN, N-S; Fifth SAR, 8; Eighth SAR, 64; George Grace to John Eaton, 23 Jan. 1869, R. D. Black to John Eaton, 3 Feb. 1869, E. McKinney to John Eaton, 2 June 1869, Citizens Petitions, n. d., JEP; First Report, cxxxvi.

place, sometimes our school was thrown out without a day's notice." Financial problems continued even with the creation of public schools. All across the state, a lack of money hindered educational efforts. Unsurprisingly, the shortage of funds hurt black Tennesseans the most. Many young blacks of Rutherford County, for example, waited longer than whites to begin the school year of 1869-70; in a segregated school system, there just was not enough money, civil authorities claimed, to rent or build all the necessary schoolhouses for the large number of black students.<sup>45</sup>

Rural life presented children with distinct problems. As will be recalled, Northern missionaries and teachers were less willing to serve the Lord and their nation in the rustic countryside of Tennessee. Bureau agent C. B. Davis of Lawrence County in 1866 reported that the first day of school was postponed because of a teacher shortage. Furthermore, school buildings were few and far between in rural areas; missionaries and agents had given towns first priority, and rural blacks had to wait their turn. In 1868, John Alvord encouraged Humanitarian Radicals to extend their mission to the countryside, where black parents resented the broken promises of the Bureau and missionaries and the children anxiously awaited an education. By 1869 many rural blacks were, in local superintendent W. H. Stillwell's words, "importunate . . . impatient, and bitter." With the arrival of teachers and schools, new problems arose: hostility

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<sup>45</sup> E. O. Tade to Samuel Hunt, 28 June 1866, AMATN, r. 2; John Ogden to Clinton Fisk, 31 Dec. 1865, RACTN, r. 16; McNeal, "Biographical Sketch of Rev. Joseph G. McKee, Jr.," 11, 13; N. H. Pearne to John Eaton, 26 Jan. 1869, JEP; First Report, cxxxiv, cxlvii.



toward teachers and crimes against schools were more pronounced in the rural areas, where there was less Bureau protection. In May 1868 alone, black children in Somerville, Saulsbury, and Pocahontas saw their teachers insulted by whites. The fierce prejudice and violence in such places as Obion and Tipton counties forced missionaries and agents there to abandon all educational work. Black farmers also expected administrators to adjust schedules to meet their needs. In Blount and Johnson counties, for instance, parents requested that the beginning of the school term be delayed until mid-October so children could help with the harvest.<sup>46</sup>

The public school system had problems that affected many black students. In September 1869 some Nashville children were unable to attend school because the city school system had insufficient funds to meet the demands of increased enrollment; the city was forced to close selected schools—many of them freedmen schools. In addition, some local superintendents were badly informed. In Grainger County, blacks started and maintained schools without the knowledge of the local superintendent of education, Clay Griffith. They did not submit attendance and condition reports, thus limiting the effectiveness of Griffith's administration. Another serious and recurring problem was a lack of money to build schoolhouses, buy furniture and texts, and pay teachers. Across the state black schools (and white ones, too) lacked money not only to provide good

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<sup>46</sup> C. B. Davis to C. B. Fisk, 28 Feb. 1866, RACTN, r. 17; Seventh SAR, 60; Sixth SAR, 46-47; T. J. Lamar to John Eaton, 15 Apr. 1868, George Grace to John Eaton, 23 Jan. 1869, W. H. Stillwell to John Eaton, 19 April 1869, JEP.

education but even, in many cases, to stay open at all. Struggling to solve his schools' financial problems, Superintendent M. C. Wilcox of Knox County eventually declared bankruptcy but was convinced nevertheless that in God's ledger he was "morally solvent."<sup>47</sup>

However, it was the political triumph of the Democrats (representing the combined forces of Conservative Unionists and ex-Confederates) that ultimately led to the death of the statewide public school system. After the election of Governor DeWitt Senter in 1869, Humanitarian Radicals feared that all of their work was done in vain. The Democrat-dominated legislature repealed the common-school law and delegated the responsibility of public education to the counties (of which only twenty-three had organized schools by 1871).<sup>48</sup>

Although Democrats ended the statewide free school system, some blacks were still determined that their children would get an education. Many black children continued attending Sabbath schools where they were taught by black and white missionaries. Memphis and Nashville maintained their own school systems, which black children attended, although whether their schools were equal to whites' is doubtful.

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<sup>47</sup> McNeal, "Biographical Sketch of Rev. Joseph G. McKee, Jr.," 11, 13; H. Clay Griffith to John Eaton, 28 July 1869, M. C. Wilcox to John Eaton, 7 Aug. 1869, JEP; First Report, cxvii-cliv.

<sup>48</sup> Phillips, "Education of Blacks in Tennessee," 157; Taylor, Negro in Tennessee, 182.

Under the decentralized school system established by the Democrats, most counties chose not to have publicly funded schools, so blacks appealed once again for missionaries' help in starting day schools and paying teachers. But even in difficult times, some blacks found a way to maintain schools. As noted earlier, the census of 1870 reported that over 12,000 out of approximately 110,000 black children attended school. Probably more than that were actually enrolled, for statistics on enrollment were not compiled systematically and many schools provided no reports.<sup>49</sup>

In Reconstruction Tennessee black children were taught not only the three R's but also religious and Victorian values and civic duties in the Sabbath schools, Bureau and missionary day schools, and the public schools. In all three black children were taught what educators believed were correct interpretations of Christianity and citizenship and learned how to live independent and industrious lives—essentially how to be free. To get along in these schools students had to conform their thoughts and actions to Northern middle-class standards. As a result, many black children matured into Protestant Christians who exhibited a fervent patriotism and a belief in free-market values.

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<sup>49</sup> W. H. Stillwell to General Eaton, 24 Dec. 1869, E. McKinney to John Eaton, 22 June 1869, N. A. Patterson to John Eaton, 25 April 1870, M. C. Wilcox to John Eaton, 6 Aug. 1869, JEP; Ninth SAR, 42, 49; Alvord, Letters From the South, 28-29.

## CHAPTER VI

### EPILOGUE: THE FIRST FREE GENERATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

Reconstruction was in some ways a continuation of the Civil War. After defeating the Confederacy, Northerners hoped to stamp out the last vestiges of slavery and reconstruct Southern society on the principles of free labor and Victorian morality. Their goals included assisting freedmen to achieve their dreams of prosperity and literacy. Defeated in war, many white Conservatives refused to be conquered and sought to undermine Reconstruction policies and restore former labor practices and social customs.

In the middle of this postwar conflict were black children. How they were to be reared and taught and disciplined were matters of contention among adult freedmen, Humanitarian Radicals, Brownlow Radicals, Conservative Unionists, and ex-Confederates. What beliefs and practices black children adopted would determine, in part, the success or failure of Reconstruction. They were laborers, they were students, and they were part of the black family. They were also the future leaders of their communities, who would teach their children and grandchildren a worldview and a way of life. This first generation of free African Americans is thus an integral part of the Reconstruction story.

Although as slaves children had varying experiences depending on their location and gender and owner's attitude, in general those under 12 years of age did little work and benefited from their parents' efforts to maintain a stable family life; simply put, they had a childhood. When the Civil War came, it brought change, welcome and unwelcome.

In ways they would never forget, young bondsmen were thrust into an unpredictable life of freedom. More than a half-century later, some former slaves were still haunted by the images of war: "I don't never want to see another war," recalled Liza Reynolds, whose childhood playground had been turned into a battlefield; what her young eyes had seen and ears had heard she remembered as the most "ragious" event of her life. The chaos and hardship of war touched the lives even of those far from the fighting. Some black children thought "the world was come to [an] end." As the war progressed, slaves escaped to the Union lines in great numbers, yet in the course of this exodus, many families were separated. Moreover, after these "contrabands" arrived in federal camps, many fathers and sons volunteered to serve the Union cause and subsequently marched off to war, some never to return home. Those they left behind in many cases endured poverty, hunger, sickness, and mistreatment. Sixty years later, the recollection of wartime hardship tormented Liza Reynolds, who had witnessed foraging Yankees burning neighbors' houses and forcing her mother to carry heavy pails of water from the creek to their camp. As if it was yesterday, in the late 1920s some elderly blacks of Davidson County recalled the confusion among many freedmen in the war's aftermath: they were "turned loose without a cent" into a land where "everything was tore to pieces." For many slave children, the first days of freedom were anything but glorious.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Sutcliffe, ed., Mighty Rough Times, I Tell You (Winston-Salem, 2000), 118-23; George Rawick, American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, 40 vols. to date (Westport, 1972-), 18:58, 122-140, 205-207.

In the wake of war, however, many families were mended. Black parents searched far and wide for their children and, with the Freedmen's Bureau's help, were in many cases reunited with them. Many black parents wanted to formalize their marriages, and did so in mass ceremonies. Much to the pleasure of Bureau agents and missionaries, legitimated black families adopted the nuclear model and imparted Victorian and free-labor values to children; one former slave in Nashville cherished the advice of her mother "to keep clean rather than have so many fine clothes." After freedom, many others noted that fathers now acted as the authoritative heads of households: an elderly man later recalled his father telling him as an adolescent that, "I was free, but as long as I was under the roof of his house he was boss." However, in adulthood some expressed regret that their parents had rejected Victorian values; one Clarksvillian recalled that his mother drank whisky as heavily as any man. Whether their parents conformed totally to Victorian standards, almost every child knew that he or she was loved, and as adults they admired their parents' fortitude and determination to provide for their children and protect them. When parents were financially strapped or cheated by their employer, Bureau agents intervened on their behalf and Northern missionaries also stepped in to help. In short, thanks mainly to the resolve of freedmen and their white friends to maintain family bonds, most black children in postwar Tennessee lived in stable two-parent homes.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 18:58, 134-40, 11B:373-76; Sutcliffe, Mighty Rough Times, 115-16, 177-78.

Some children were separated from their families, however. Orphaned by war or never reunited with family, the parentless found refuge in the orphanages of Northern missionaries or served as apprentices to whites. In either case, orphans were taught how to be productive citizens in a free-labor society and were watched over by Bureau agents. Some destitute parents, especially single mothers, were forced to apprentice out one or all of their children, but in so doing they tried to maintain family unity by binding siblings together, visiting their children, and reporting any contract violations to the Bureau. Despite its good work, however, the undermanned agency at times unintentionally separated black families and caused financial hardships.

Black children benefited most from the Bureau's cooperation with missionaries and the Department of Public Instruction in establishing schools. For many freed black Tennesseans, almost nothing was more important than obtaining an education, and for missionaries and agents there was no more significant task than to provide educational opportunities. During Reconstruction, most black children attended at least one of three types of schools: Sabbath, Bureau and missionary day, and public schools. Although the educational experiences and quality of instruction varied, in all three black children were taught moral and practical lessons to prepare them for life in a Victorian and free-labor society. Although white Tennesseans initially denounced the education of blacks, and considered being taxed for it particularly outrageous, some eventually endorsed public schooling, for they realized that it benefited every class and race. The idea of Northerners teaching black children was never fully accepted, however. As a result, some black students and their teachers were harassed and even physically threatened. But in their later years, African Americans remembered Reconstruction as the beginning

of educational progress. All freedmen wanted to learn how to read and write. While opportunities for schooling were readily available in towns, in the rural areas blacks waited impatiently, sometimes for years, before a day school was established. In such places, what was learned in Sunday school was for some children the limit of their education. But whatever the type of school they attended, school days remained vivid in the memories of the freed people. More than fifty years later, one woman of Gallatin sang Sunday school ditties word for word. One went thus:

I'll away to the Sunday School  
I'll away to the Sunday School  
My mother calls me and I must go  
To meet her in the promised land.

The formally educated remained proud of their schooling all their lives. One elderly man from Nashville enumerated the benefits of his education: "I am a natural grammarian. I love botany and zoology, too."<sup>3</sup>

Those educated only in the school of hard knocks seemed in some cases envious of the formally educated. An elderly Huntsville man named Reed remarked that with an education he could have been a "son of thunder," living his golden years "on flowery beds of ease." But instead he had lived a troubled life. Others regretted the unfortunate timing of their birth. A Clarksville man who grew up in the 1840s and 1850s, before black children had much opportunity to read and write, claimed that educated blacks had

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<sup>3</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 18:109-23; Sutcliffe, Mighty Rough Times, 52-58.



always treated him condescendingly. With a trace of bitterness, he insisted that the Reconstruction generation and its children had had everything handed to them. Another elderly Clarksvillian claimed that the formally educated lacked gumption—especially those of the 1920s: “They pass the grammar school and then they turn out to be a fool. Just got ideas and no sense.” But not all resented the fortune of other freedmen. In retrospect, one woman of Nashville, who had ignored her mother’s advice and forgone an education at the age of 14 in favor of work and marriage, was delighted that her peers had attended school “to learn something.”<sup>4</sup>

Almost everyone of the Reconstruction era, at least those interviewed in the late 1920s and 1930s, lauded the value of hard work. For the vast majority of Reconstruction children, school attendance never superseded labor. One man of Williamson County remembered that he had toiled incessantly as a youngster, for the times demanded it; his sons, he claimed, lived comparatively carefree lives. As the Reconstruction generation witnessed the changes of early twentieth-century America, they questioned the moral character and hardiness of a generation reared with the benefits of technology. Interviewed in the late 1920s, one woman regretted that African Americans relied on technology, for the men and women of her generation found independence in a life of hard work and self-reliance. She was proud that as a young woman she had “done anything any man ever done ‘cept cut wheat.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sutcliffe, Mighty Rough Times, 40, 141-53, 175-80; Rawick, American Slave, 18:189.

<sup>5</sup> Sutcliffe, Mighty Rough Times, 40, 118-23; Rawick, American Slave, 18:30, 176.

Former slaves also recalled Reconstruction as a time of economic striving. When they were growing up, however, these freedmen had learned that the market not only gives but also takes away. Economic optimism abounded in Reconstruction Tennessee, especially among teenagers, many of whom sincerely believed in rags to riches stories. Some remembered in their old age that the first days of freedom had been an adventurous time of seemingly unlimited economic opportunities. Thomas Rutling of Wilson County, for one, had had dreams of becoming a doctor and owning a beautiful horse. But few such dreams had been realized. James Thomas, a former slave from Nashville, recalled that after a few years of freedom the freedmen were “not as rich as they thought they would be.” Eliza Walker, also of Nashville, told of suffering from the whims of the market and particularly regretted that her father’s failing business had resulted in the loss of their house. Thinking over the financial woes of freedmen in his lifetime, an elderly Nashvillian offered this adage: “It’s not how much you make, but what you save that counts.”<sup>6</sup>

Long after Reconstruction, many blacks who had grown up in that time endorsed temperate behavior. Alcohol use, in particular, they associated with wastefulness. Drinkers squandered their money when they should have saved it, observed one elderly

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<sup>6</sup> Sutcliffe, Mighty Rough Times, 28, 75-80, 117-18; John Blassingame, ed., Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies (Baton Rouge, 1977), 614; Rawick, American Slave, 18:140.

Davidson countian, echoing the moral counsel offered by Clinton Fisk, the first superintendent of the Tennessee Bureau. What frightened many freedmen more than anything was the swilling of whisky. A Clarksville man remembered his school civic lessons well, calling whisky an unnatural drink that slowly killed an individual and ultimately destroyed the moral decency and strength of the nation: “[Whisky] makes a treacherous nation and that begins a treacherous people.” One black man even blamed the emergence of Jim Crow on freedmen’s abuse of whisky. Unable to hold their liquor, drunken black men, he claimed, had insulted their fellow train passengers, so in time the government instituted segregation to remove the problem. Some fervent teetotalers annoyed even their relatives and close friends; one recalled that his convictions had cost him his marriage.<sup>7</sup>

Although they cherished the Sabbath schools of their youth, many freedmen deplored the loss of religious enthusiasm and the distinctive character of slave worship. Many remembered the spiritual fervor of their parents and later questioned the religious sincerity of “college preachers” and anyone who abjured emotive worship. The nostalgic wanted to revive what they considered genuine and charismatic Christianity, for they believed that church services had in many cases become mere lectures rather than cathartic experiences. According to one man, blacks “don’t have religion like they used to.” Another important religious change was that many blacks worshipped without a

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<sup>7</sup> Rawick, American Slave, 18:140-41; Sutcliffe, Mighty Rough Times, 52-58, 152.

white presence. After emancipation, the desire to assemble in all-black churches was as powerful as the desire for an education, and blacks quickly set out to accomplish both.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, blacks remembered their Reconstruction childhood as a time of opportunity. In their golden years, black Tennesseans were thankful for educational opportunities and the freedom to make choices about work and family. These black children, the Reconstruction generation, were the first free generation of African Americans.

Many white Tennesseans in the Reconstruction years, however, feared social revolution. In their eyes, the “bottom rail was on top” and their status and livelihood were threatened. Some feared economic competition from blacks: “Why . . . give a nigger work when white men are starving?” A freedman named Chapman believed racial prejudice had intensified after the war. Most likely an apprentice, he had been whipped for fighting a white boy. Also, blacks frequently were cheated out of a day’s wages. Laboring sunrise to sunset without compensation in Carroll County, Mary Divine had regarded life in Reconstruction as little different from bondage, except that, thankfully, there were no more beatings. Many freedmen considered Klan activity as an effort to restore slavery. Frankie Goole recollected that nightriders limited blacks’ mobility and thus in a sense revived slave patrolling. But even the unmolested were haunted by the

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<sup>8</sup> Sutcliffe, Mighty Rough Times, 75-80, 115-16.

Klan's terrorism. As a youth, Maggie Woods was terrified by the sight of passing Klansmen, although they never bothered her family.<sup>9</sup>

Even with the restoration of Conservative rule, many blacks had remained optimistic, for education and the ballot were still available to some. Although blacks' Republican votes had little effect on public policy in the post-Reconstruction Democratic-controlled state, whites still feared black power. By the 1880s, even white Republicans, arguing that black support harmed the character of their party, advocated black disfranchisement. Joining with the Democrats, they soon achieved the near-total elimination of black voting in Tennessee.<sup>10</sup>

By the 1890s, the Reconstruction generation of blacks was living in a world of segregation, lynching, and black powerlessness and accommodation. To avoid further setbacks, they generally accepted the situation while endeavoring to promote the interests of their race as best they could. They worked hard, strengthened their community institutions, and took comfort in their faith. What many believed, especially the religious, was that if they abided by a strong moral code whites would one day

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<sup>9</sup> Loren Schweninger, ed., From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur: The Autobiography of James Thomas (Columbia, 1984), 123; Sutcliffe, Mighty Rough Times, 30-31, 166-70; Rawick, American Slave, 18:205-207, 11A: 232-34.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph H. Cartwright, The Triumph of Jim Crow: Tennessee Race Relations in the 1880s (Knoxville, 1976), 255-59.

acknowledge their equality. At the turn of the twentieth century, African Americans certainly endorsed the sentiments of Edmund Kelly, the first black Baptist ordained in Tennessee: “We simply pray that the rights and protections guaranteed us in [the Declaration of Independence], may be recognized and granted.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis Laska, “Tennessee’s First African-American Ordained Baptist Minister,” Tennessee Baptist History 6 (2004): 20.

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