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REACTION AND ADJUSTMENT: THE STRUGGLE
OF ALABAMA FREEDMEN IN POST-BELLUM
ALABAMA, 1865-1867

By
John B. Myers

Active fighting begun between the Union and the Confederate armies had virtually ended in Alabama by April, 1865. Subsequently on May 4, 1865, the Confederate forces east of the Mississippi River commanded by General Richard Taylor officially surrendered at Citronelle, Alabama. At the same time approximately 439,000 former slaves became free.¹ Prior to this event some Negroes were freed in areas of Alabama occupied by Union troops, but for all practical purposes, emancipation came with Taylor's surrender.

At the war's end Alabama was in a chaotic state politically, economically, and socially. Her economic as well as human resources were seriously depleted. As a result of the war, an estimated 40,000 white Alabamians lost their lives. The fires of war ravaged homes and fields. Wide areas of northern Alabama had been laid waste by contending armies and guerilla bands. Most railroads were not in working order and bridges had been burned. Railroad companies were impoverished with liquidation impending.²

Montgomery, the capital city of Alabama and the original capital of the Confederacy, was occupied by Union forces. Not only the Confederate State's government but also state and local authority ceased to function in most sections of Alabama. Military forces exercised effective authority only in the immediate areas in which they were stationed.³

¹Elizabeth Bethel, "Freedmen's Bureau in Alabama," *Journal of Southern History*, XIV (February, 1948), 49; *Harper's Monthly*, XXXI (May, 1865), 259.

²John L. Hunnicut, *Reconstruction in West Alabama; The Memoirs of John L. Hunnicut*, ed. William S. Hoole (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1959), 16; Bethel, "Freedmen's Bureau in Alabama," 58; U. S. Congress, *House Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 70, 291.

³Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Modern America, 1865-1878* (New York, 1927), 2-3; Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Tour of Southern States, 1865-1866* (London, 1866), 211-212, 374, hereafter cited as *After the War: A Tour*.

During May and most of June, 1865, Alabama had no legally constituted government. The period of time which elapsed between the date of surrender and the establishment of a provisional government amounted to nearly fifty days. It was not until June 21, 1865, that President Andrew Johnson appointed Lewis E. Parsons provisional governor for Alabama. According to the President's program, Alabama was to draft a new constitution and cooperate closely with the Freedmen's Bureau and military commanders.⁴ It was under these conditions that Alabama Negroes were freed.

The Alabama's slaves' initial reaction to emancipation was varied. They usually received news of their freedom from invading Federal occupational troops or from masters. Such news was frequently followed by an atmosphere of great excitement and jubilee. Reports circulated throughout the state of freedmen being in a great commotion following their liberation⁵ Many wanted to enjoy a long holiday and rejected the idea of work which seemed incompatible with their interpretation of freedom. Generally the former slaves appeared to lack confidence in their former masters and viewed their own former status as slaves with bitterness and revulsion.⁶ Under the slave institution implicit obedience was required, but to freedmen, obedience, like work did not seem consistent with freedom.⁷

Although some freedmen refused to labor, others, who were loyal to their masters, remained at work. Some were encouraged to stay by the rumor that property of their former masters would be divided at the end of the year among those who had worked the land as slaves. Other blacks, convinced that they would not be free as long as they remained on the plantations,

⁴Hunnicut, *Reconstruction in West Alabama*, 16; John Witherspoon DuBose, *Alabama's Tragic Decade: Ten Years of Alabama, 1865-1875*, ed. James K. Greer (Birmingham, Alabama, 1940), 3.

⁵W. Swayne to L. E. Parsons, October 31, 1866, Lewis E. Parsons Personal Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama, hereafter cited as Parsons Personal Papers.

⁶William Fiske to George Whipple, March 14, 1866, American Missionary Association Archives, Fisk University Library, Nashville, Tennessee; W. Swayne to L. E. Parsons, October 31, 1866, Parsons Personal Papers.

⁷*Harper's Weekly*, X (February 10, 1866), 83; Charles Stearns, *The Black Man of the South and the Rebels* (New York, 1872), 328.

flocked to towns, army depots, or to refugee camps.⁸ Still others traveled about the state seeking members of their family separated by slavery.

The freedmen spent a great deal of their time on the move. In Clarke County, Alabama, the freedmen were reportedly in motion. "Marches and counter-marches were observed in various directions." A constant stream of freedmen of all ages and conditions were seen passing through Selma, Alabama, supposedly enroute to Mississippi or Tennessee. A Eufaula, Alabama, correspondent cited a great influx of Negroes from the countryside to the towns.⁹ Most of their traveling was done on foot. Alabama's transportation facilities were disrupted. The railroad accommodations which did exist were segregated and those designated for blacks were generally inadequate. Freight cars and open platforms were the most common facilities even though they were charged first class fares. On a train traveling from Opelika, Alabama, to Montgomery, Negroes were packed in a boxcar and huddled around a box stove to keep warm. Freedmen occasionally objected only to be admonished by whites. "You're free ain't you? Good as white folks? Then pay the same fare and keep your mouth shut."¹⁰

The movement of freed blacks to the larger towns was shown by the population increase in the counties of Mobile, Montgomery, and Dallas with a proportionate decrease in other counties. The Alabama census for 1866 revealed a marked shift

⁸Montgomery *Daily Advertiser*, September 9, 1865; Horace Mann Bond, "Social and Economic Forces in Alabama Reconstruction," *Journal of Negro History*, XXIII (July, 1938), 296; Edward Chambers Betts, *Early History of Huntsville, Alabama, 1804-1870* (Montgomery, Alabama, 1916), 105; U. S. Congress, *Senate Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 43, 9.

⁹Grove Hill *Clarke County Journal*, October 19, 1865; U. S. Congress, *Senate Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 43, 9; Montgomery *Daily Advertiser*, October 15, 1865; U. S. Department of War, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and the Confederate Armies*, I Series, XLIX, Part II (Washington, D. C., 1897), 940, hereafter cited as *Official Records*.

¹⁰Reid, *After the War: A Tour*, 385-386; Nevins, *Emergence of Modern America*, 4; John Richard Dennett, *The South As It Is*, ed. H. M. Christman (New York, 1965), 293.

by the freedmen from rural to urban areas from 1860 to 1866.¹¹ Since slavery restricted most blacks to the plantation, the freedmen hoped the towns might afford better opportunities to them.

Sudden emancipation under any circumstances would have been attended by extreme hardship and suffering. The liberation of Alabama slaves in the post-war period, an era characterized by depression and scarcity, increased the freedmen's hardships considerably. Clothing was scarce. Blacks frequently possessed only the clothes they wore and had a slim chance to procure more. Negro housing in towns as well as rural areas was extremely poor. A village of huts was erected near the ruins of an armory in Selma. During cold weather freedmen huddled around a fire which stood in the middle of the shacks. A number of Montgomery Negroes lived on the old fair grounds in shelters erected out of pine poles. The settlement was appropriately named "Hard Times."¹² Those who did not construct homes frequently had to pay exorbitant rent. A poorly constructed barn with no fireplace cost twenty dollars per month. Some were not fortunate enough to find even poor living quarters and succumbed to the harsh weather. During the winter of 1865 a Montgomery newspaper reported frequent incidents of Negroes freezing to death in back streets.¹³

Not only were Negro dwellings inadequate but the sanitary conditions were atrocious. Food seemed to be as scarce as good housing. Both blacks and whites were starving. A news correspondent in Mobile was appalled to learn that many blacks subsisted mainly on refuse "which in ordinary times would hardly be given to a dog." The predicted horrors expected during the

¹¹U. S. Congress, *House Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 70, 241; Theodore Branter Wilson, *The Black Codes of the South* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1965), 82; W. Swayne to L. E. Parsons, October 31, 1866, Parsons Personal Papers. In Dallas County (Selma) the Negro population increased from 25,840 in 1860 to 29,601 in 1866, Mobile County 12,571 to 16,684, Montgomery County 23,780 to 30,762 for a total increase of 14,756.

¹²Reid, *After the War: A Tour*, 369; *Mobile Daily Advertiser and Register*, July 21, 1865.

¹³Montgomery *Daily Mail*, January 11, 1866; Mrs. Dr. Wren to O. O. Howard, December 11, 1865, Oliver Otis Howard Papers, Hawthorne-Longfellow Library, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, hereafter cited as Howard Papers.

winter of 1865 were described as "the very valley of the shadow of death." It was estimated that in Alabama alone 200,000 persons were in danger of extreme suffering and starvation during the 1865 winter.¹⁴ Under such circumstances it was no wonder that there were widespread reports of pilfering by blacks. Food was at a premium and a stray chicken, hog, or turkey was subject to seizure. Significantly blacks were not the only petty thieves. Whites also resorted to stealing to keep themselves alive.¹⁵

Inadequate housing, clothing, transportation, and food contributed to widespread outbreaks of disease. Tuberculosis, venereal disease, yellow fever, and smallpox were common among freedmen and frequently caused death or permanent damage. The lack of medical facilities resulted in disease reaching epidemic proportions. Entire communities were stricken with smallpox and other malignant diseases.¹⁶

During the hot summer months yellow fever raged in the Alabama coastal regions. Mobile reported a large number suffering from the disease during the summer of 1865.¹⁷ With the approach of winter came the outbreak of dreaded smallpox. Huntsville, Tusculumbia, Eufaula, Selma, Athens, Mobile, and Montgomery reported widespread occurrence of the disease during the winter of 1865-1866. Extreme measures were taken to control the spread of smallpox. In Eufaula, Alabama, the head of the family was to report any occurrence of the disease in his family or be fined \$50.00¹⁸ When a Negro woman died of smallpox in Limestone County, the owner of the dwelling threatened to burn the house if the Freedmen's Bureau did not remove the body. Freedmen were accused of bringing smallpox into the

¹⁴New York *Times*, June 12, 1865. U. S. Congress, *Congressional Globe*, 39th Congress, 1st Session Part I, 94.

¹⁵*Harper's Weekly*, IX (December 16, 1865), 786; Henderson Donald, *The Negro Freedman* (New York, 1952), 179; Benjamin Averitt to L. E. Parsons, no date, 1865, Lewis E. Parsons' Official Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama, hereafter cited as Parsons Official Papers.

¹⁶Foster B. Zincke, *Last Winter in the U. S.* (London, 1868), 132, hereafter cited as *Last Winter*; Donald, *The Negro Freedman*, 180.

¹⁷Zincke, *Last Winter*, 158; *Mobile Daily Advertiser and Register*, July 21, 1865.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, March 7, 1866.

towns from the countryside. A wagon-load of ailing Negroes was brought into Montgomery to be treated for smallpox much to the dismay of the town's inhabitants who demanded a quarantine. Such an event further solidified the belief that the disease was more common among blacks¹⁹ This accusation was probably true. The higher death rate from smallpox among freedmen could doubtlessly be attributed to the squalid conditions under which they lived. In a forty day period 400 Negroes died in a camp near Montgomery. Some whites believed that the high Negro mortality rate gave credence to their claims that the black population in the United States would soon die out.²⁰ Those whites stricken by smallpox were described as "careless in their habits and do not scruple to mix very intimately with their sable friends."²¹

Most areas handled smallpox in a similar manner. Those afflicted were isolated from the healthy inhabitants by being placed in a community pest house. In Montgomery, Athens, and Huntsville ambulances toured the streets conveying all suspicious cases to designated places.²²

Besides inadequate material necessities and poor health, the freedmen's difficulty in adjusting to freedom was complicated by the attitude of white Alabamians. Many of them did not accept emancipation gracefully. They could hardly conceive of black men as anything other than chattels. White Alabamians generally assumed that the Negro occupied a middle ground between the human and the animal. Some predicted eventual Negro extinction caused by the Negro's licentious nature and his reputed refusal to marry. Others attributed the possible decline to the Negroes' inability to take care of them-

¹⁹Huntsville *Daily Independent*, March 8, 1865; Joshua Burns Moore Diary, March 11, 1866, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama (Typed copy, original in possession of Earnestine Devours, Laurel, Mississippi); Grove Hill *Clarke County Journal*, January 18, 1866.

²⁰Chicago *Tribune*, September 2, 1865; Mobile *Daily Advertiser and Register*, July 21, 1865.

²¹Dr. T. R. Will to W. L. Coleman, December 6, 1865, Parsons Official Papers.

²²Huntsville *Daily Independent*, January 20, 1866; Athens *Post*, February 17, 1866; Dr. T. R. Hill to W. L. Coleman, December 6, 1865, Parsons Official Papers.

selves.²³ Many thought that the blacks, stripped of their protection under slavery, could not exist. More important it was believed that the absence of plantation discipline left white women unprotected from the degraded black male. Furthermore, there was a widespread fear that Negroes would seek revenge against whites.²⁴ Many white Alabamians professed that no two races considered so unequal as the Caucasian and the Negro could coexist upon any terms except as master and servant. They felt one must give way to the other and "it is not difficult to determine which one will do the giving."²⁵

The former slaveholding class was only slightly less hostile to emancipation than poor whites. They had gone to war to defend slavery and seemed unwilling to accept the death of the peculiar institution.²⁶ Though few men believed slavery could be restored, John W. Alvord, a Freedmen's Bureau agent, observed that public talk in Montgomery seemed to indicate a fixed purpose to oppose the freedmen's elevation. Benjamin C. Truman, appointed by the President to view conditions in the South, said that "when one believes that a race of beings is incapable of advancement he is prone to withhold the means of advancement. . . ."²⁷ In a few remote areas where Federal troops had not penetrated there were attempts to keep the Negroes as bondsmen. Outside Union Springs, Alabama, William C. Jordan, a former Confederate, was charged by military authorities for violation of his parole for refusing to emancipate his slaves.²⁸

²³Edward Hawthorne Moren to his wife, December 4, 1865, Edward Hawthorne Moren Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama, hereafter cited as Moren Papers.

²⁴Montgomery *Daily Mail*, May 16, 1865; U. S. Congress, *Senate Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 43, 8; Grove Hill *Clarke County Journal*, September 28, 1865.

²⁵Montgomery *Daily Ledger*, August 7, 1865; Mobile *Daily Advertiser and Register*, July 21, 1865.

²⁶*Congressional Globe*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, Part I, 94; W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (Philadelphia, 1935), 138; John W. Alvord to O. O. Howard, December 3, 1865, Howard Papers.

²⁷U. S. Congress, *Senate Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 43, 9.

²⁸H. E. Sterkx, "William C. Jordan and Reconstruction in Bullock County, Alabama," *Alabama Review*, XV (January, 1962), 64; U. S. Congress, *House Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 70, 291.

Prejudices and bitterness directed toward the freedmen were not restricted to the white planter class. Though the poor whites reputedly had been injured by slavery, they were more concerned with separating themselves from blacks than they were in changing their status in southern society. They felt their individuality as a class could be continued by the barrier which had existed between themselves and the Negro slaves. Paul H. Buck claimed that poor whites hoped to maintain their position in society by making former slaves realize that the will of the white man would still prevail. To poor whites emancipation represented future social and economic dangers seemingly far greater than the continued superiority of the planter class. Blindly this group of whites sought to perpetuate a system which had virtually condemned them to a caste for 200 years.²⁹

Racism was only one reason for opposition to emancipation. The entire labor system had been upset. Former masters as a rule were skeptical of free Negro labor and viewed the future pessimistically. In 1865 Whitelaw Reid, a northern journalist traveling in Alabama, noticed that planters seemed to have no faith in Negro labor unless they "had the power to apply the lash."³⁰ Carl Schurz sensed a prevailing opinion among Alabama planters that the Negro would not work unless compelled by force.³¹ A Union soldier on a reconnaissance mission in southeastern Alabama found that the freedmen accepted and understood their position much sooner than former masters. He was told by a planter: "If we cannot whip the Negro, they and we cannot live in the same country."³²

The white attitude toward former slaves resulted in many abuses. The volatile atmosphere was intensified by Alabama

²⁹W. M. Brewer, "Poor Whites and Negroes in the South Since the Civil War," *Journal of Negro History*, XV (January, 1930), 26; Paul H. Buck, "Poor Whites in the Ante-Bellum South," *American Historical Review*, XXXI (October, 1925), 54.

³⁰Walter L. Fleming, *The Sequel of Appomattox* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1921), 47; Reid, *After the War: A Tour*, 372.

³¹John T. Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour of Its Battlefields and Ruined Cities* (Hartford, Connecticut, 1867), 432; Carl Schurz, "Can the South Solve the Negro Problem?" *McClure's Magazine*, XXII (January, 1904), 260.

³²*Official Records*, I Series, XLIX, Part II, 1042.

being predominantly rural and characterized by frontier ruggedness and individualism. Such traits were further aroused by the lack of organized governmental restraint which frequently led to vigilante action.³³

Matters were complicated by the breakdown of civil law enforcement. General Charles R. Woods, commander of the Federal troops in the Department of Alabama, listed several counties which had neither civilian nor military authority. He said civil officials were either unable or unwilling to enforce the law. Woods claimed that "such conditions keep the rest of the community in fear of having their homes burned or losing their lives."³⁴ Even in areas where Union soldiers were garrisoned, the military was not always effective. Huntsville, Alabama, suffered robbery, murder, arson, and rapine at the hands of marauding bands. The streets of the town were crowded with the drunken and debauched. Thomas W. Conway, the Superintendent of Labor for the Department of the Gulf, called for provost marshals and troops in each county to secure order and provide proper police protection. He said that the freedmen had to be protected by the power of the Federal government or "thousands of blacks would be slain."³⁵ Carl Schurz reached the same conclusion. "When colored people are in the hands of bad ele-

³³T. B. Callis to W. Swayne, June 7, 1866, General Wager Swayne Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama, hereafter cited as Swayne Papers; Hunnicut, *Reconstruction in West Alabama*, 22.

³⁴Carl Schurz to Andrew Johnson, August 29, 1865, Andrew Johnson Papers, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida (Microfilm, original in the Library of Congress, Washington D. C.); James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1902* (New York, 1903), VI, 323-324; U. S. Congress, *Senate Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 2, 66. On May 17, 1865, Alabama was designated as a part of the Department of the Gulf commanded by General E. R. S. Canby in New Orleans. On June 27, 1865, the Department of Alabama was created with headquarters at Mobile. This department was divided into 4 districts commanded by General Charles R. Woods.

³⁵Betts, *Early History of Huntsville*, 12; L. E. Parsons to Andrew Johnson, October 2, 1865, Governor Lewis E. Parsons Letterbook, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama, hereafter cited as Parsons Letterbook; *Official Records*, I Series, XLIX, Part II, 954.

ments," Shurz wrote President Johnson, "such things inevitably lead to acts of violence an apprehension."³⁶

Military occupation seemed to agitate an already tense situation. Especially the presence of black soldiers aroused much disgust and apprehension. Some of the blacks who served as occupational troops had formerly been Alabama slaves. Former owners took their presence as a personal affront. In Mobile a citizen remarked, "There is my Tom. How I would like to cut the throat of that impudent good-for-nothing."³⁷

Alabama civil authorities attempted to cope with the lawlessness. In July, 1865, Governor Parsons directed several sheriffs to provide a sufficient number of well-armed deputies to preserve peace in their respective counties. In September, 1865, temporary volunteer military organizations were established on a county-wide basis. These organizations were authorized to assist the civil authorities only in case of emergency.³⁸

These local militias were organized more to control than protect the Negro. They patrolled the highways in the central part of the state. No freedman was permitted to travel without a pass signed by his master. Since many blacks left plantations after emancipation, large numbers without passes were apprehended. Captain W. A. Poillon, a Freedman's Bureau agent in Mobile, received reports of organized patrols with hounds guarding the highways. "The Negro does not know whether to leave the plantation and be harassed or remain on the plantation and be brutalized," Poillon lamented.³⁹ Reports persisted of the mili-

³⁶Carl Schurz to Andrew Johnson, September 5, 1865, Andrew Johnson Papers.

³⁷John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War* (Chicago, 1961), 35; James E. Sefton, *The United States Army and Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1967), 50-51; Reid, *After the War: A Tour*, 213.

³⁸L. E. Parsons to Andrew Johnson, October 2, 1865, Parsons Letterbook; Adjutant Report to Robert M. Patton, no date, 1866, Robert M. Patton Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama; L. E. Parsons to J. C. Moorehead, November 11, 1865, Parsons Official Papers.

³⁹U. S. Congress, *House Reports*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 30, part III, 8; U. S. Congress, *House Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 70, 285; U. S. Congress, *Senate Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 2, 11.

tia robbing freedmen, shooting them on public thoroughfares for refusing to halt, and lodging them in jail for traveling without a pass.⁴⁰

Alabamians rationalized the militia's actions as being necessary to prevent a black uprising. Fear of insurrection was widespread among whites, but the fear was generally without foundation. Some applied the term insurrection in the loosest sense. Disrespect and insubordination among freedmen were considered synonymous with rebellion. Accusations of insubordination among blacks ranged from failure to doff their hats when approaching whites to refusal of beatings.⁴¹

Prior to the Christmas holidays in 1865, there was state-wide apprehension of a Negro revolt. Idle freedmen who awaited the rumored grant of forty acres and a mule were indeed restless. As Christmas approached, blacks were reported arming themselves with all available weapons. In Eufaula, Alabama, freedmen supposedly held large quantities of arms and ammunition.⁴² Similar reports circulated from Russell and Shelby Counties. "The Negroes are becoming impudent, and unless something is done I fear the consequences," M.D. Sterrett warned Governor Parsons.⁴³

The insurrection never occurred, and the violence that did result was carried on by whites. Negro homes in Lowndes County were broken open, searched, and firearms along with other personal possessions were seized under the pretense of preventing an insurrection. Russell and Chambers counties described

⁴⁰*Congressional Globe*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, part I, 94.

⁴¹Reid, *After the War: A Tour*, 386-387.

⁴²Bond, "Social and Economic Forces in Alabama Reconstruction," *Journal of Negro History*, XXIII (July, 1938), 296; Thomas Frederick Woodley, *Thaddeus Stevens* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1934), 485; see also Fawn M. Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens, Scourge of the South* (New York, 1959); C. J. Pope to L. E. Parsons, December 11, 1865, Parsons Official Papers.

⁴³M. D. Sterrett to L. E. Parsons, December 11, 1865; C. J. Pope to L. E. Parsons, December 11, 1865; R. C. Toney to H. B. Cooper, September 23, 1865, Parsons Official Papers.

similar situations. Eufaula freedmen complained that their homes were ransacked and money taken. In several other instances Alabama civil authorities, backed by militia, searched freedmen's homes for weapons without the sanction of the occupants.⁴⁴

Such action by whites was partially understandable considering the muddled condition of Alabama authority, but most significant was that the whites' worst fears of insurrection were unfounded. Nevertheless, the homes of innocent freedmen had been pillaged purportedly because of their possession of weapons. Wager Swayne, assistant commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, was aggravated by the intrusions upon the rights of Negroes. He reminded Alabamians that the Constitution of the United States espoused the right of the people to bear arms. Furthermore, all citizens were to be protected against unreasonable search and seizure. Swayne emphasized that Federal troops were in Alabama to protect all people.⁴⁵

Violence in Alabama became more the rule than the exception. Crimes of all types were committed in 1865. Men roved in large bands, day and night, taking the law into their own hands. Violence was not directed only against blacks. Many whites felt much more secure by spending their evenings in their homes "due to the prevalence of crime and robbery."⁴⁶ Nevertheless, abuse was aimed primarily at black people. Northern travelers gave some examples of such abuse. A horse obviously abandoned by a Union soldier was found by a freedman and was taken to the plantation. The master claimed the horse after recognizing its good quality. The Negro sought aid from the Freedmen's Bureau and returned to the plantation with an order verifying his claim. The perturbed master wielded a gun and threatened

⁴⁴U. S. Congress, *House Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 70, 292; M. D. Sterrett to L. E. Parsons, December 11, 1865, Parsons Official Papers; *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, January 25, 1865.

⁴⁵Grove Hill *Clarke County Journal*, January 18, 1866; *New York Times*, March 26, 1866; *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, January 25, 1866.

⁴⁶Grove Hill *Clarke County Journal*, September 7, 1865; Edward Hawthorne Moren to his wife, December 4, 1865, Moren Papers.

to kill the Negro if he was bothered again. When a train stopped in a station or a boat at a landing whites reportedly spent the delays tormenting blacks who wished to board.⁴⁷

Some whites carried their abuses of freedmen to atrocious extremes. Cases reported at the hospital in Montgomery indicated that many freedmen who deserted the plantations were savagely treated. Thomas W. Conway saw freedmen with slashed throats and without ears. A *New York Times* correspondent in Mobile said former planters relieved their frustrations of defeat and subjection by severing the ears, noses, and lips of former slaves. In one day five freedmen came into Montgomery with their ears severed. Others appeared with slit throats and marks left by beatings.⁴⁸

Some whites were not satisfied merely to abuse freedmen. Twelve cases in which Negroes had been killed by whites were reported to the provost marshal in Selma. In the same town a freedman was hanged by his thumbs and subjected to gross mistreatment for a week before he was beaten to death with a club. In Decatur a drunken ex-Confederate shot an innocent Negro through the head. The civil authorities refused to take action but warned him to stay out of sight for a day or two. A Montgomery Negro returning home surprised some white men robbing his wife. He was shot in the head.⁴⁹

Murders of freedmen were most frequent in the former large slaveholding areas. A Negro plantation foreman in Pickens County was mutilated and murdered after he complained about his wages. The assistant superintendent of the Freedmen's Bureau in Clarke County reported three freedmen hanged

⁴⁷J. Silsby to E. M. Strieby, December 26, 1866, American Missionary Association Archives; Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour*, 429; *New York Times*, June 12, 1865.

⁴⁸*Official Records*, I Series, XLIX, Part II, 954; *New York Times*, June 12, 1865; U. S. Congress, *Senate Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 2, 70-71; Claude M. Fuess, *Biography of Carl Schurz* (New York, 1932), 135.

⁴⁹U. S. Congress, *Senate Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 2, 18, 72; James T. Sawyer to J. J. Giers, May 30, 1866, American Missionary Association Archives; T. B. Callis to W. Swayne, June 7, 1866, Swayne Papers.

by their former masters in April and May. In the same county a planter hanged a freedwoman in the presence of his neighbors only three weeks after he had killed the woman's husband. Near Bladon Springs a Negro was shot outside his former master's premises and dragged into the stable to make it appear that he had been caught stealing. In the same area a freedman was chained to a tree and burned to death. A Bladon Springs preacher claimed the road in Choctaw County "stunk with dead bodies of servants who fled their masters."⁵⁰

Evidence from various sources indicated numerous crimes and murders committed against freedmen. The total number could not be ascertained but the figures were not necessary to prove that violence was a common characteristic of Alabama.⁵¹

Even if there had been no violence, the condition of Alabama freedmen would have been appalling after their emancipation in 1865. They were without education and many economic necessities. Sudden emancipation placed them in a state of political, social, and economic limbo. They needed assistance to adjust to their new status. The Federal government took a major step in providing such assistance on March 3, 1865, by creating the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands. The Secretary of War was directed to issue provisions, clothing, and temporary shelter for suffering refugees and freedmen. The President appointed Major General Oliver O. Howard as Bureau Commissioner. Assistant commissioners were appointed for each insurrectionary state.⁵²

⁵⁰U. S. Congress, *House Reports*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 30, part III, 8; Walter L. Fleming, *Documentary History of Reconstruction* (2 vols.; Cleveland, Ohio, 1906), II, 68-69.

⁵¹Fleming, *Documentary History of Reconstruction*, I, 69; John A. Carpenter, "Atrocities in the Reconstruction Period," *Journal of Negro History*, XLVII (October, 1962), 237, 241-242.

⁵²U. S. *Statutes at Large*, XIII, 507-508; U. S. Department of War, *General Orders of the War Department*, No. 91, May 12, 1865, hereafter cited as *General Orders*.

General Wager Swayne was designated assistant commissioner for Alabama on June 20, 1865. Swayne, a native of Ohio, was the son of a U.S. Supreme Court justice and one of Howard's former officers.⁵³ The Bureau did not go into operation under Swayne's direction until July, 1865. Prior to his arrival the Alabama Bureau was conducted by Federal military authorities. The organization at first was experimental but began to take shape by November, 1865. Bureau officers were to advise and protect freedmen and to care for the sick and impoverished.⁵⁴

The most pressing task facing the Bureau was the issue of rations to starving black and white Alabamians. A ration was supposed to feed a person for one week and usually consisted of corn meal, pork or fat back, flour, and sugar. Children under fourteen were allowed half rations.⁵⁵ Thousands of people depended upon Bureau rations for food. In November, 1865, more than 70,000 rations were issued. It was thought that less food would have to be provided the next year, but in the early part of 1866 the material condition of Alabama became worse. With the scant crop of 1865 exhausted, the situation became desperate. In June alone, 792,349 rations were issued. During an eleven-month period, November, 1865, to September, 1866, the Freedmen's Bureau issued a total of 3,789,788 rations in Alabama. Approximately 166,589 whites and 72,115 freedmen received rations.⁵⁶

⁵³Bethel, "Freedmen's Bureau in Alabama," 49; DuBose, *Alabama's Tragic Decade*, 32.

⁵⁴*General Orders*, No. 102, May 31, 1865.

⁵⁵U. S. Congress, *House Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, No. 11, 49.

⁵⁶Bethel, "Freedmen's Bureau in Alabama," 64; W. Swayne to L. E. Parsons, October 31, 1866, W. Swayne to L. E. Parsons, September 30, 1867, Parsons Personal Papers. From November, 1865, to October, 1866, 54,381 white adults and 112,208 white children received rations as compared to 32,928 black adults and 39,187 black children. From December, 1866, to August, 1867, 40,341 white adults and 86,906 white children, a total of 127,247 received rations. For the same nine-month period 16,457 black adults and 25,134 black children, a total of 41,591, were issued rations.

Since more whites than blacks received rations, there were some charges of fraud and discrimination. The superintendent of the Bureau in northern Alabama claimed that "I am confident if rations are delivered to local authorities for distribution, the colored people would receive no benefit from them."⁵⁷ These accusations were difficult to substantiate and were probably exaggerated. There were very large numbers of indigent whites in northern Alabama which accounted for a part of the racial disparity of issued rations.⁵⁸

The Bureau was aided by other state and private relief agencies. The National Freedmen's Relief Association provided clothing and food for Alabama freedmen. The Southern Famine Relief Committee of New York was a major source of food. Supplies sent to Alabama were consigned to M. H. Cruikshank, commissioner of destitution, and to the assistant commissioner of the Bureau. These rations were distributed by selected citizens who worked in conjunction with the judges of probate and Bureau agents. The American Union Commission also issued a relief appeal in behalf of indigent blacks in Alabama. Still the Freedmen's Bureau contributed the most toward the relief of blacks and whites in Alabama.⁵⁹

Freedmen who were without food, shelter, and gainful employment were gathered in temporary Bureau colonies until they could be relocated. The colonies were centrally located and provided aid to the indigent, sick, and aged of both races. These Bureau camps consisted of a number of cabins for orphans, a shelter for persons in transit, and a hospital for the sick.⁶⁰ The colony system was established to provide freedmen with a place

⁵⁷J. B. Callis to W. Swayne, June 7, 1866, Swayne Papers.

⁵⁸W. Swayne to L. E. Parsons, October 31, 1866, Parsons Personal Papers.

⁵⁹*Harper's Weekly*, X (February 10, 1866), 83; *New York Times*, June 6, 1865; *Mobile Weekly Advertiser*, January 6, 1866; *Huntsville Daily Independent*, January 17, 1866; W. Swayne to L. E. Parsons, September 30, 1867, Parsons Personal Papers.

⁶⁰*New York Times*, August 17, 1865; *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, September 9, 1865.

to stay until they could find work. Those blacks who desired labor erected buildings and shelters for no compensation other than food and shelter. In September, 1865, the freedmen's colony in Mobile reported the arrival of many old and indigent blacks who were driven off the plantation because they were no longer useful to their former masters. In Huntsville a colony occupied an abandoned plantation. Under the Bureau's direction freedmen were growing 400 acres of cotton and corn⁶¹

Temporary food and shelter were not enough. The freedmen also needed medical assistance. The Bureau began to establish hospitals in September, 1865. Clothing and blankets rejected by the army as defective, rations, medicine, and fuel were supplied to the hospitals.⁶² During the smallpox epidemic in the winter of 1865 the hospitals treated the sick, burned infected garments and supplied new ones to convalescents. Freedmen's Bureau hospitals were located in Mobile, Selma, Garland, Montgomery, Demopolis, Huntsville, and Talladega. During the period from 1865 to 1867, the Bureau hospitals treated approximately 9,859 freedmen and 473 white patients. When the accumulations of sick were released, the hospitals remained occupied by victims of criminal assault and accidents.⁶³

The Freedmen's Bureau or some similar relief organization was necessary in Alabama during the months immediately following the war. The provisions of rations, clothing, shelter, and medical attention prevented starvation and death. But the Freedmen's Bureau's efforts provided only temporary aid to the destitute blacks.⁶⁴ Obviously Alabama freedmen required a more permanent type of assistance. The legal recognition of the former slaves as free men in Alabama became a necessary step

⁶¹W. Swayne to L. E. Parsons, October 31, 1866, Parsons Personal Papers; U. S. Congress, *House Executive Documents*, 39th Congress, 2nd Session, No. 1, 742.

⁶²W. Swayne to L. E. Parsons, October 31, 1866, Parsons Personal Papers; W. Swayne to L. E. Parsons, October 4, 1865, Parsons Official Papers.

⁶³W. Swayne to L. E. Parsons, September 30, 1867, Parsons Personal Papers.

⁶⁴St. Louis *Post Dispatch*, December 21, 1865; Cincinnati *Commercial*, March 17, 1866.

in their behalf. Freedmen hoped to gain equality before the law, the right to testify in courts, and sit on juries. They saw no reason to be deprived of the privileges of freedom which other Alabamians enjoyed.⁶⁵ Whites could not be depended upon to treat the former slaves fairly.⁶⁶ Therefore, freedmen needed adequate state laws to guarantee their rights as well as sincere assistance from individuals upon whom they could rely. Alabama's situation required such measures if the state was to emerge from the depths of chaos and violence.

⁶⁵James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1964), 174; W. Fiske to G. Whipple, March 14, 1866, in American Missionary Association Archives; *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, December 21, 1865.

⁶⁶Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro in the United States* (New York, 1951), 533.