

## Background: Reconstruction in Charlotte Mecklenburg, 1865-67

On the whole, Reconstruction in Charlotte Mecklenburg was much milder than in many parts of the South. Unlike some southern cities, Charlotte was not damaged in the Civil War. Because it was a railroad hub, the city grew rapidly between 1860 and 1870, nearly doubling in population from 2300 to 4500. Business in Charlotte boomed after the war, although Mecklenburg planters did not fare as well. In general, black-white relations were relatively good, with few racial incidents in the early years of emancipation.

Immediately following the Civil War, in late April 1865, Charlotte suffered some burning and looting. As a result, many Charlotteans welcomed the arrival of Federal troops, who soon restored order to the city. Approximately 5000 troops, most from New Jersey and Ohio, camped in Charlotte for the next 2-1/2 years. Relations between the troops and local citizens were generally cordial, unlike many places in the South. When the last troops left in December of 1867, ten years before the last Federal troops were pulled out of the South, Mayor S. A. Harris presented the troops with a resolution adopted by the Board of Aldermen thanking the soldiers for their good behavior.

Many Mecklenburg slaves, upon hearing of their freedom, left their masters and congregated in town. This was a common occurrence all over the South. Most freedmen didn't feel free until they left the plantation. In addition, they felt safer in town with the Freedmen's Bureau and Federal troops nearby to protect their rights. Cities and towns also offered opportunity to meet with other blacks and develop a distinctive black community with neighborhoods, schools, and churches. Many whites were frightened by the large numbers of blacks who congregated in Charlotte. (See Document #1-1)

Mecklenburg's planters were devastated by the loss of slave labor and by the fact that many former slaves simply did not want to work on plantations when they had opportunities to work elsewhere. Many Mecklenburg slaves also migrated to the midwest and the deep south, where they heard that wages were better. The Western Democrat reported that many farms were being sold at sheriff's sales when farmers could no longer make ends meet. In August of 1865, ads appeared in the Western Democrat calling for white labor to work local plantations. Many whites also refused to hire blacks because of the Freedmen's Bureau, claiming that they got tired of appearing before the Bureau for alleged violations of labor contracts with their black laborers. (See Documents .1(g)-1(i))

As in many parts of the South, immigration societies were organized to bring white immigrant labor to Charlotte Mecklenburg. This movement failed since most immigrants preferred to own their own farms rather than work as hired laborers.

Unlike many southern cities, Charlotte had few racial incidents following the Civil War. Most white complaints about blacks centered around their congregating in town and their involvement in political affairs.

From the earliest days of freedom, blacks began establishing their own separate communities and social institutions. As early as May of 1865, Charlotte had a black church, Clinton Chapel. By 1866-67, the Freedmen's Bureau had established schools for blacks and blacks were becoming actively involved in politics through the Republican Party. In 1867, Biddle Institute, a college to train black teachers and ministers was established in Charlotte. (For more detail on the growth and development of black neighborhoods and institutions, see section #3)

*Note to 8th grade teachers:* This section complements pages 282-296 of Parramore's *North Carolina: The History of An American State*

### **Documents # 1 (g), (h), and (i): The Freedmen's Bureau**

The Freedmen's Bureau was an agency of the Federal government established immediately after the Civil War. Its purpose was to ease the lives of former slaves as they entered the world as free people. With a district office in Charlotte that served western North Carolina, the Freedmen's Bureau provided a number of services to newly freed blacks. The Bureau established schools and distributed food and clothing. In addition, the Bureau mediated disputes between blacks and whites, particularly disputes over labor contracts. While offering much support to the freedmen, the Freedmen's Bureau was a source of irritation to many whites who saw it as a tool of northern Radical Republicans used to interfere in their local affairs.

Immediately following the Civil War, much confusion existed in the South about the status of blacks. It was unclear what civil rights they possessed, if any. Document 1 (g) "Rules for the Government of Freed Men in North Carolina", was issued from Raleigh and distributed throughout the state. It first appeared in Charlotte's Western Democrat on May 23, 1865, just a month after the Civil War ended. This document points out many practical considerations surrounding freedom, such as who was responsible for minors, the aged and infirm as well. as the new working relationships between whites and blacks. Document 1(h) "Circular to the Freedmen of Western North Carolina," also reflects the confusion and misinformation which followed in the

wake of emancipation. Issued from Charlotte in October of 1865, this document was circulated among blacks to clear up erroneous ideas about freedom. While Captain Barnett of the Freedmen's Bureau clearly explains the government's stance on blacks, most blacks could never have read this document since they were illiterate. This document was presented to the Mint Museum of History by the late Fred Alexander, who served in the State Senate and was an important black leader in Charlotte. The document was Passed down through his family. Document 1(i) "The Freedmen's Bureau", is an excerpt from Dr. J. B. Alexander's memoirs. As a former slaveholder and planter from Mecklenburg County, Alexander's memoirs reflect how many white Southerners felt about the Bureau.

*Suggestions for the classroom:* After having students read Document 1(g) "Rules for the Government of Freed Men in North Carolina," ask the following questions:

- (1) What obligations did former masters have to their former slaves immediately following the Civil War?
- (2) According to this document, what role did the Federal government play in providing for newly freed blacks?
- (3) How were blacks supposed to support themselves after the Civil War? What problems do you think they encountered?
- (4) How were these rules supposed to be enforced?
- (5) How were freed blacks supposed to learn about their rights? Do you think this could be a problem? Why?

Document 1(h) is a much more detailed follow-up to Document 1 (g) . The following questions can be asked

- (1) What were some of the wrong impressions that blacks had about freedom, according to Captain Barnett?
- (2) According to this document, what would the government do for newly- freed blacks? Why do you think the government's role was so limited? (Be sure to point out to the students that 4 million blacks, most of whom were illiterate and with few skills, and with no experience with freedom, were thrust out into the world overnight.) Do you think the government should have done more? (Also point out that it wasn't until the 1930s, with the New Deal, that the government an active role providing for the public welfare.)

(3) According to Barnett, what rights did the freedmen have? What rights did they not have?

(4) What advice does Barnett give the freedmen? Do you think it is good advice? Why?

(5) Why do you think Barnett tells the freedmen not to try to get the right to vote? Do you think it is good advice?

Document I (i) ,gives a local white planter's view of the Freedmen's Bureau.

The following are suggested discussion questions. Note that Alexander refers to "The Captain", John Barnett, author of Document 1(h).

(1) What impression of the Freedmen's Bureau do you get from Alexander's memories? Do you think he is correct? How might he be biased?

(2) Why do you think Alexander had so many bad feelings about the Freedmen's Bureau? Do you think his feelings are justified?

(3) Based on this document, what conclusions would you draw about white-black relation in Charlotte Mecklenburg right after the Civil War?

(4) What do you think Alexander means when he talks about "whipping a fifteenth amendment?"

Document #1(g)

"Rules For The Government of Freed Men in North Carolina"  
Headquarters Department of N. Carolina, Army of the Ohio  
Raleigh, N.C., May 15, 1865.  
General Orders, No. 46

(Published in the Western Democrat, May 23, 1865)

The following rules are published for the government of Freedmen in North Carolina, until the restoration of civil government in the State:

I. The common laws governing the domestic relations, such as those giving parents authority and control over their children, and guardians control over their wards are in force. The parent's or guardian's authority and obligations take the place of the former master.

II. The former masters are constituted the guardians of minors and of the aged and infirm, in the absence of parents or other near relatives capable of supporting them.

III. Young men and women, under twenty-one years of age, remain under the control of their parents or guardians until they become of age, thus aiding to support their parents, and younger brothers and sisters.

IV. The former masters of freedmen may not turn away the young or the infirm, nor refuse to give them food and shelter; nor may the able bodied men or women go away from their homes, or live in idleness, and leave their parents, children, or young brothers and sisters, to be supported by others.

V. Persons of age, who are free from any of the obligations referred to above, are at liberty to make new homes wherever they can obtain proper employment; but they will not be supported by the government, nor by their former masters.

VI. It will be left to the employer and servant to agree upon the wages to be paid; but freedmen are advised that for the present season they are to expect only moderate wages, and where their employers cannot pay them money, they ought to be contented with a fair share in the crops to be gathered. They have gained their personal freedom. With industry and good conduct they may rise to independence and even wealth.

VII. All officers, soldiers, and citizens are requested to give publicity to these rules, and to inform the freed people as to their new rights and obligations.

VIII. All officers of the Army, and of the city police companies, are authorized and required to correct any violation of the above rules within their jurisdiction.

IX. Each District commander will appoint a superintendent of freedmen, (a commissioned officer with such number of assistants (officers and commissioned officers) as may be necessary, whose duty it will be to take charge of all the freedmen in his District, who are without homes or employment. The superintendents will send their homes all who have left them in violation of the above rules, and will endeavor to find suitable employment for all others. The superintendents will provide suitable camps or quarters such as these not to be otherwise provided for, and attend to discipline, police, subsistence, &c.

X. The superintendents will hear all complaints of guardians or wards, and report the facts to the District commanders, who are authorized to dissolve the existing relations of guardian and ward in cases which may require it, and to direct the superintendent to otherwise provide for the in accordance with the above rules.

By command of Major General Schofield

J.A. CAMPBELL

Assistant Adjutant General

Document 1 (i)

*From Reminiscences of the Past Sixty Years by Dr. John B. Alexander, 1908.*

This was the Pandora's Box from which issued many of the evils that produced discord between the races. In almost every instance the Agent appointed to attend to the Freedman's Bureau was a dishonest character, and of course irritated our people. A great number of people were summoned to appear before the Agent. Any trumped up charge by a negro was sufficient to have our best men in the country appear in person before the Agent, whether the charges were true or false, convenient or inconvenient, he had to attend court. I will give a few instances of the Agent Co. proceedings. In the fall of 1865 I was notified that my presence was wanted in the Freedman's Bureau for not treating certain colored children humanly. I obeyed his orders, and came down, some 17 miles, and no witness appeared against me. I demanded of the Captain to know why I was compelled to attend his court, neglect my own business and find him not ready for the trial. He said "You will have to appear in my office this day next week." Suffice it to say I did not appear till notified.

The next time I was ordered to appear, and when I got there he was trying Lock Gibson for whipping a negro, but was venting his spleen upon Mr. Gibson in a most outrageous manner; intimating that he was a bad character, had sworn falsely, and threatened to put him in jail, as he said he would do to the Harrises of Cabarrus county. At this point I arose and said, "I know Mr. Gibson, and you can depend upon whatever he says, his neighbors give him a very good name." Here the Capt. turned upon me with the fury of a Hyena, cursed me, threatened to put me in jail, and ordered me out of his office if I could not keep my mouth shut. He was up walking about while cursing me. I got up and started out when Mr. Gibson put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Doctor, all this cursing and abuse is on my account, come back

and I will stamp his livers out of him." To an uninterested spectator, Mr. Gibson seemed to be master of the situation; the Capt. or Agent looked wild, as much as to say, "I wish I was out of this." Occasionally those who were in command had quite an unpleasant time in executing their edicts. Another time I was summoned to appear before Capt. Barnett for whipping a fifteenth amendment on a certain day, I proved to him I did not have a negro on my farm at that time.

The Capt. said he may have been mistaken about the day, but he knew I was a hard master. There was one of my former slaves sitting by and I referred him-Capt. Barnett-to John. The Capt. asked him if I was not a hard master. John remained silent. I told him to answer the question, but to tell the truth. John answered, "well sir, he didn't whip often, but my lord, when he did whip he made it count."

Another came in which I was interested and I will leave off personal reminiscences.

In the fall of 1866 I was summoned to appear in the "Freedman's Bureau with regard to not paying Bob Berry for four months work-\$32.00." I did not get down until the day after the trial. Here I found a new Agent-one Shaffer, who proved himself a vile character in after life. I asked him to open the case and allow me to introduce certain evidence to show that the negro had not been on the place since the surrender. He said, "No, you ought to have been here yesterday, but you were afraid to meet the colored man, I'll make you pay the bill." I replied, "if you will step out of this office I will settle with you in two minutes." He ran into the back room to arm himself, when Mr. Sam Harris rushed in and took me by the arm, saying "come out of this, don't you know they have 6,000 troops here, and will put you in jail? Stay out of this office, and I will have another day appointed for a new trial. Time passed on and when the trial came on another man had charge of the office, who appeared willing to do what was right. I never saw Shaffer again until 1897, when I had a chance to tell him of his meanness; and I told him.

There was a very estimable gentleman, Mr. V. Q. Johnston, living ten miles northwest of Charlotte, engaged in farming, working his place with free negroes; one of his men became very insolent, quit work and told Capt. Johnston he would report him to Capt. Shaffer. In a few days Shaffer sent for Capt. Johnston to appear in his office the next day. Next day he rode down to the Yankee's office, and then he found his negro sitting by the side of Shaffer, looking as if they were on a par. Capt. Johnston asked Shaffer what he wanted with him. The Agent said, "this colored man has preferred charges against you." "State your charges," said Capt. Johnston. Whereupon the Captain asked him why he cursed him. He said "because I got you where I want you, and you can't help yourself." Capt. Johnston walked out and hastened up street and entered the first store he came to, and seized an axe handle, returned, to the Freedman's office and began to pay the negro for his cursing; the negro appealed to the Agent for help. But

he said he could not help him, he would have to have recourse to the state courts. Capt. Johnston whaled him until he was satisfied that both the negro and his friend, the Freedman's Agent, had learned a wholesome lesson.

### **Documents 1 (j) through 1 (n): Reconstruction from the Newspaper's Point of View**

One of the few sources of information about the Reconstruction period in Charlotte-Mecklenburg is the *Western Democrat*, a Charlotte newspaper. In the early days of Reconstruction, the newspaper was filled with editorial comments concerning the behavior of the freedmen and the "intrusion" of Radical Republican politics in the South, particularly through the Freedman's Bureau.

Be sure to notice the dates on the articles. They range from June 1865 to May 1867.

*Suggestions for the classroom:*

Have students read these articles carefully. The following are suggested discussion questions:

1. What complaints does the *Western Democrat* have about freedmen? What positive comments?
2. Why do you think blacks congregated in town (Document 1 (l))? Why do you think the *Western Democrat* was upset with blacks congregating in town?
3. Document 1 (k) is entitled "A Sensible Negro". Why, from the writer's point of view, was this negro 'sensible'? Do you think he was sensible? Why or why not?
4. Why do you think many plantation owners thought that blacks would not work without force? Why do you think some blacks chose not to work?
5. In Document 1 (m), what does the *Western Democrat* claim that "northerners fanatics" are doing to black-white relations? What, according to the article, would be the result of this?
6. In Document 1 (n), why is the *Western Democrat* against blacks attending political meetings?
7. Based on these articles, how would you describe black-white relations after the Civil War? Do these articles tell the whole story? How accurate do you think they

are? What are the advantages and disadvantages in using old newspapers to write history?

Document #1 (j)

"Thieves", from the *Western Democrat*, June 6, 1865

"THIEVES. General complaint has recently been made about the robbery of gardens and chicken roosts in this town and vicinity, and - believe soldiers have been suspected of committing these depredations; but so far as the proof shows, negroes are the guilty parties. Four negroes were caught last week stealing onions and chickens. Captain Smith, the post Provost Marshal, had the rogues paraded through the streets with barrel shirts on, bearing appropriate inscriptions, and carrying specimens of the stolen property. We hope Capt. Smith will succeed in breaking them of their thievish propensities.

We never had the least idea that many negroes would work if they could get a living in any other way, but we did not expect them to commence stealing so soon after being declared free. Their idea of freedom is to live in idleness and eat and sleep."

Document #1(k)

"A SENSIBLE NEGRO," from the *Western Democrat*, July 11, 1865

" A friend furnishes us the following as the substance of a speech made by a negro man in a neighboring town, on the 4th of July:

My Colored Friends: I belong to the same man I belonged to when I can first remember. He has always treated me kindly, and he is a perfect gentleman, and I am a gentleman, because I have always tried to do my duty to my master. I expect to stay with him as long as we both live. I intend to do the very best for him I can, and feel that in promoting his interest I am doing but good service to myself.

Now, many colored people are of the opinion that the way to be gentlemen and ladies is to have nothing to do. Now I tell you, people that will do nothing will cut a poor figure in the world after a while, for they have nothing to go on. No true gentleman is lazy. If you wish to be gentlemen and ladies you must work, and in order to do this successfully you must have something to work with you must have a home, land, and means of cultivating it. If you leave your former masters you can't have these. I have no doubt you have all the necessaries of life in greater abundance than you can have after you leave your masters.

My advice for you is for you to go home, stay there, do all you can to please and profit your masters, and Heaven's richest blessings will come upon you."

Document #1 (l)

*Western Democrat*, July 25, 1865

"Cannot the civil or military authorities of Charlotte adopt some law or regulation to prevent the colored people of the county and surrounding country from gathering in town on Saturdays in such large numbers? We fear that trouble will result from the practice if continued... The white man is compelled to work regularly for his living, and the sooner the negro is made to understand that he is obliged to do the same, the better it will be for all concerned ... We have no prejudices against the negro - we want him to succeed, if he can, in maintaining himself and if everybody, north and south, will quit talking about 'negro equality' and 'negro suffrage', and strive to inaugurate some fair measure to compel him to work, they will do more good for the negro in that way than in any other."

Document #1(m)

"The Freedmen", from the *Western Democrat*, April 17, 1866

"THE FREEDMEN. From what we can learn, we think the Freedmen in this section are becoming more industrious and doing pretty well-behaving with more propriety than they did some months ago. Some of these people really deserve credit and commendation for the good example they have set their fellows and for using their influence for good. There are yet many who seem to prefer idleness and poverty to labor and industry, and hope to live without work; but this number is not as large as it was some time ago. The fact is, if the Northerners fanatics would let the negro alone, and quit their fussy and demagogging harangues about him, and leave the black and white man in the South to arrange matters between themselves, it would greatly promote the interests of both races. If an attempt is made to enforce the civil rights bill, and the annoyance of the people of the South Continued by those in authority, the result will be that white labor will be substituted for colored labor, and the negro must either emigrate or suffer. The southern people are disposed to give the colored man a fair chance, but they are unwilling to be annoyed and dictated to by those who are influenced by spite and hatred and ignorance; and if it is continued, they will withdraw all employment from the colored man, and leave him to his fate and the tender mercy of radicals."

Document #1(n)

"Advice Gratis", from the *Western Democrat*, May 7, 1867

"ADVICE GRATIS. In all directions we hear and read of advice being given to the colored people. Public speeches are being made for the negro's special benefit - it being understood, of course, that the negro's benefit consists in voting with a particular party or for particular men. Now, we suggest that the negro will be more benefited by large crops of corn, &tc., than by all the political harangues from this until doom's day.

The only advice we have to give the colored man is to attend to his work and strive to make money, and provide something for his wife and children. Money in the pocket or corn in the crib, and plenty of meat in the smoke house will be found to be better friends to the colored man than all the political speakers in the land.

If the colored man loses a day now and then attending political meetings, he will find himself at the end of the year that much poorer. He cannot afford to lose one day in each week from his labor. He needs every cent he can make, and it is wrong for any

one to induce him to neglect his work. The right to vote will never fill the stomach of black man or white man."