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## A NORTHERNER REPORTS ON FLORIDA: 1866

*Edited by* JOE M. RICHARDSON

IN THE FALL OF 1865 Colonel Thomas W. Osborn, Assistant Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau for Florida, decided to divide the State into five districts, and send agents on inspection tours of each. The inspectors were to make full reports on the general condition of the freedmen and the amount of crops being raised. Special notice was to be taken of the proportion of non-producing members among the ex-slaves, and the number of white and colored schools, scholars, and teachers in each section. In addition, the agents were to gauge the white attitude toward the Union, and determine whether the civil officials recently appointed as Bureau agents showed an interest in the affairs, or a disposition to act as agents. After considerable delay, A. E. Kinne toured East Florida. Kinne had come to Florida from Syracuse, New York, to teach in Negro schools operated by the National Freedmen's Relief Association. The following report was submitted at the close of his investigation, on October 15, 1866 :

Col T. W. Osborne [*sic*] <sup>1</sup>

Asst. Com. Bureau R. F. & A. L. for Florida

Sir,

I have the honor to submit the following Report as the result of observations made during a tour of inspection in the "4th District of East Florida Embracing the counties of Nassau, Duval, St. Johns, Clay, Putnam, Marion, Sumpter [*sic*] and Hernando."

It affords me great pleasure to be able to report that the of-

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1. Thomas W. Osborn, a colonel from New Jersey, was Assistant Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau in Florida from September 13, 1865, to June 11, 1866. Osborn had earned a degree from Madison University in New York, and was studying law when the war broke out whereupon he became an artillery officer in the Union Army. He was described by his superior, General Oliver O. Howard, as "a quiet unobtrusive officer of quick decision and pure life." Oliver Otis Howard *Autobiography* 2 vols. (New York, 1907), II, 218; Rowland H. Rerick, *Memoirs of Florida*, 2 vols. (Atlanta, 1902), I, 306; William Watson Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913), 393. The text of this report is taken from Records of the War Department, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Assistant Commissioner for Florida, Reports Received, National Archives.

ficers and people on whom I called, uniformly received me with kindness, and communicated any information desired with commendable frankness. In the plan of my report I have chosen not to follow the order of notes as found in my diary, as such a course would involve much useless repetition both of language and facts.

The propriety of such arrangements will be manifest when it is known that there is much uniformity of practices in the counties which compose the "4th District" and which were visited by me.

#### CONDITION OF FREEDMEN

The condition of the Freedmen is generally better than expected. Instead of finding them wandering from place to place, or idling, they were generally employed on the plantations, in mechanical labor or as house Servants.<sup>2</sup>

Very generally written contracts had been entered into between Employers and Employees - with a disposition on the part of Each to meet the conditions of such contracts.

The division of the last year's crop, though in some cases not fairly done, has given pretty general satisfaction and in many cases enables the freedmen to supply themselves with food for the ensuing year. From information gathered from various sources, without actual and formal investigation the conclusion is irresistibly reached that subsequent to the suspension of hostilities and the Surrender, the freedmen did not generally labor as faithfully as before the surrender and hence the crops suffered, resulting in the diminution of the amount which might otherwise have been reasonably expected. Still in many cases very good crops were realized and whenever the division was equitably made in such cases the share to the freedmen has been such as to enable them to subsist for the present year.

It was found that those freedmen, who had been fairly dealt with both in humane treatment and an equitable division of the crops, were dilligently [*sic*] and contentedly laboring for their

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2. Immediately after emancipation many Florida Negroes tended to wander about and congregate in towns but by 1866 most of them were back on the plantations, largely at the insistence of the Freedmen's Bureau. Stetson Kennedy, *Palmetto Country* (New York, 1942), 93.

former masters under contracts <sup>3</sup> - while those who were otherwise treated, or supposed themselves to be, were separated, by, sometimes their own choice and sometimes by the choice of the employer, from the old plantation and either laboring for others or their whereabouts quite unknown. Most commonly, the freedmen know, from general reputation, the character of the neighboring planters - so that they are found with those whom they have chosen to labor for. Said one influential planter, "the Negroes have a kind of telegraph by which they know all about the treatment of the Negroes on the plantations for a great distance around." I judge they avail themselves of this knowledge in the choice of their employers. Indeed so certain and sudden is the retribution, that I found some large planters who were unable to employ a single laborer-their broad fields . . . doomed to be uncultivated . . . the present season-while others more favorably known, are able to obtain all the help, and more, than they can employ. While this state of things is everywhere existant, there is on the whole a want of laborers. Where there is one planter who has engaged more than his complement, there are two who can not obtain so many as they want. The question naturally arises, where are the laborers? After much inquiry I came to this conclusion. The want is traceable to the following:

1st - Many Small farmers, hitherto unable to own a laborer, is able now to hire one or two-and these in the aggregate, amount to many.

2nd - A few planters are engaging rather more than their usual number.

3rd - Some are engaging in lumbering, and by the liberal wages they are offering are taking from their accustomed places many freedmen who otherwise would be planting. <sup>4</sup>

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3. Many freedmen upon emancipation felt that they were not really free unless they left the old plantation where they had always worked. However, those who had been well-treated frequently returned to work for their former masters under contracts. One reporter wrote that "within a few days {after emancipation} nearly all were back on their old plantations again, hard at work on the suffering crop." *New York Tribune*, June 20, 1865; Walter Lynwood Fleming, *The Sequel of Appomattox* (New Haven, 1921), 38.

4. In June, 1866, it was reported that there was a thriving lumber industry around Fernandina. The freedmen were doing the majority of the work for wages, averaging twenty-six dollars a month. One lumberman reported that even "common, poor, unreliable, lazy Negroes" had "to be paid \$1 per day and found." The average wage for the farm laborer was about twelve dollars a month for first-class

4th - Another cause is found in the fact that so many are desirous of collecting and living about villages and cities.<sup>5</sup>

5th - Allow me to suggest one other cause which may, or may not be operating more or less remotely in producing this result. Freedmen are not infrequently sent or enticed away and do not return. Their friends and employers institute a search without success. I have some grounds for believing that many meet with violence.<sup>6</sup> I am also fearful that others meet with a still worse fate - that they are decoyed away under various pretenses for the real purpose of sending them to a market-perhaps to Cuba.<sup>7</sup>

The wants of the District through which my tour led me, clearly indicated that not an able bodied man or woman need be idle for want of labor.<sup>8</sup>

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males. More frequently they worked for a division of the crop, so naturally the freedmen were eager to work in the lumber industry. Junius E. Dovell, *Florida: Historic, Dramatic, Contemporary*, 4 Vols. (New York, 1952), II, 545; *New York Tribune*, June 7, 1866; *Senate Executive Documents*, 39th Cong., 2nd Sess., Rept. 5, pp. 43-44.

5. The Freedmen's Bureau and the military frowned on the Negroes' desire to reside in the towns, and took action to prevent their congregating there. For example, in June, 1865, the Commander of East Florida ordered the military in Jacksonville to "cause all Negroes unemployed to be sent out of the town . . . ." and to take measures to prevent their return. In September of the same year the Assistant Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau wrote to the agent at Fernandina to put an end as "far as possible" to the Negroes collecting around posts and towns. The agents were to prevent the collection by refusing to give rations to any except the most destitute and needy. Letter to Col. William L. Apthorp from Capt. Samuel L. McHenry, June 18, 1865, in U. S. Army Commands, Florida, Vol. XVI, RG 98, National Archives; Letter to Capt. D. P. Hancock from Asst. Comm. T. W. Osborn, September 24, 1865, in U. S. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, Florida Records, National Archives. Hereafter cited as B.R.F. and A.L.
6. Violence toward the Florida Negro in 1866 was certainly not unknown. It was reported that around Fernandina, the locality Kinne is writing of, there was "a band of persons styling themselves Regulators threaten[ing] the lives and property of citizens . . . ." In February, 1866, Kinne had written that "several freedmen have been driven from their place of labor, threatened and even fired upon, one colored man four times." Letter to Asst. Comm. T. W. Osborn from Thomas Leddy, February 24, 1866, in B.R.F. and A.L.; Letter to Asst. Comm. T. W. Osborn from A. E. Kinne, February 13, 1866, in B.R.F. and A.L.
7. There had been several rumors that Negroes from Florida were being shipped to Cuba and sold as slaves, but investigations showed the rumors to be false. Letter to Comm. Oliver O. Howard from Asst. Comm. T. W. Osborn, November 14, 1865, in B.R.F. and A.L.; Letter to Bvt. Col. George L. Hartruff from Maj. Gen. John G. Foster, April 27, 1866, in U. S. Army Commands, Florida, Vol. VI, RG 98, National Archives.
8. Labor was scarce in that area, but "no scarcity of labor appears to

This want of labor compels many person, hitherto unused to labor to rely upon their own personal efforts for a maintenance of their families, and it is nearly wonderful that SO many of this class are found so cheerfully yielding to the necessities of the situation.

With reference to the clothing of the freedmen, my testimony is not flattering; yet relatively it compares not very unfavorably with that of the poor whites.<sup>9</sup>

Whether in quality or quantity the *freedmen's* clothing is Equal to that of the *Slave* I know not, but the opportunities I have had for observation assure me that it is inadequate to the wants of any people<sup>10</sup> - certainly not for a people having been going through a process of civilization and christianization for two or three hundred years. But there will be less actual suffering than I have expected to witness . . . .

#### CONTRACTS

In some counties very few contracts have been made.<sup>11</sup> In others very generally the laborers are working under contract, witnessed by the Judge of Probate.<sup>12</sup>

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be caused by indolence on the part of the freedmen but, on the contrary, they appear very anxious to be employed." Letter to Lt. Allan H. Jackson from Bvt. Maj. Jacob A. Remley, January 31, 1867, in B.R.F. and A.L.

9. Many observers commented that the poor whites were in almost as deplorable a condition as the freedmen. One Northern lady wrote that she visited thirty-seven white and Negro families in Jacksonville and found them "equally poor, equally dirty and destitute." A few of the freedmen however, were relatively well-dressed for Northern beneficent organizations sent many barrels of clothing for them. Letter to Asst. Comm. T. W. Osborn from Miss E. B. Isham, March 6, 1866, in B.R.F. and A.L.; Letter from Esther H. Hawks, February 8, 1865, in *The Freedmen's Record*, I (March 1865), 39.
10. One observer, William Cullen Bryant, who visited Florida in 1843 and again in 1873, believed that the Negroes were more "neatly attired" while slaves. Charles I. Glicksberg, "Letters from William Cullen Bryant from Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XIV (April, 1936), 263-264.
11. The Bureau Agent of Marion County wrote that some of the freedmen were hesitant to make contracts, because they were assured of employment anyway. Furthermore the ex-slaves frequently had an aversion to the term contract, "believing as it is binding that it partakes of the character of slavery." Letter to Lt. Allan H. Jackson, from Bvt. Maj. Jacob A. Remley, January 31, 1867, in B.R.F. and A.L.
12. Osborn, on November 21, 1865, issued a circular making the Judges of Probate in each county a Bureau agent. This, of course, authorized them to supervise the making of contracts. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, November 27, 1865; House *Executive Documents*, 39th Cong., 1st Sess., Rept. 70, p. 86.

On examination of these contracts it is found that though generally fair in the conditions some were very unfair and such as to render it impossible for the laborer to comply with them and not be greatly in debt at the close of the year.

Whatever may be the conditions of these contracts or the intentions of those making them, there is room for trouble in their final settlement and unless great care and supervision are exercised justice will be cheated. There is so wide a difference between employer and employee, in respect to their ability to transact ordinary business and to comprehend the force of a contract, and so great a desire rapidly to repair losses and regain fortunes, and withal so little desire on the part of employers to see the freedmen rise in any respect, that unless an enlarged benevolence is to govern in the settlement at the close of the year, little will have been accomplished for the colored man except to arouse him from a not too trusting confidence to an unpleasant and inconquerable suspicion. The officers appointed to act as agents in the several counties of the state seem willing to do as well as they know how, but in some counties but little attention is given to any of the duties of the office of Judge of Probate-certainly little as agents of the Bureau.<sup>13</sup>

SCHOOLS

Total number of children in colored schools .....	990
" white " .....	172
Total number of teachers in col'd schools .....	17
" white .....	4

At Fernandina there is an asylum for orphan children. This institution was opened in the winter of sixty four in the building formerly owned by Joseph Finegan.<sup>14</sup> It is under the care and

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13. In early 1866, Osborn reported that the civil officials were generally acting in good faith. Some cases of partiality, however, had been observed, and some removals had been effected. Letters to Comm. Oliver O. Howard from Asst. Comm. T. W. Osborn, January 10, February N.D., 1866, in B.R.F. and A.L.

14. Joseph Finegan had been a Confederate general and his property had been confiscated. His house was returned to him in June, 1866, whereupon the asylum was moved to Magnolia. Letter to Comm. Oliver O. Howard from Asst. Comm. John G. Foster, October 1, 1866, in B.R.F. and A.L.

support of the National Freedmen's Relief Association of New York. The Superintendent, Miss Chloe Merrick, with Miss [Abbie W.] Johnson as assistant are laboring with a commendable zeal.<sup>15</sup> Fifty children, gathered from various parts, are here clothed [,] instructed [,] and fed, and made to feel neither want [n]or orphanage.

. . . . .

### CROPS

So broken and disarranged have been the system and practices of farming during the past few years, that no very definite information as to the relative amount of crops raised . . . can be given. Such was the restriction on cotton growing placed upon the planters by the Rebel Congress that very little cotton has been raised the past year,<sup>16</sup> and in the districts of Eastern Florida, the working force has been so irregular that it was really difficult to obtain any positive and reliable information.

But from repeated inquiries and comparing results the average amount of cotton to the acre is not seventy five pounds, while the range is from fifty to four hundred pounds.

So with corn, the average is believed to be not more than Eight bushels to the acre while the range is from five to sixty.

In respect to sugar cane there does not appear to be so great a difference, the reason I judge to be, that only a comparatively small amount of land is thus appropriated, and that little of the very best quality. From two to four barrels of sugar or from six to twelve barrels of syrup to the acre is about a just statement.<sup>17</sup>

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15. Miss Merrick was from Syracuse, New York, and later became the wife of Harrison Reed, first Republican Governor of Florida. She exhibited great energy and executive ability, and the asylum was described as "a perfect success and a model institution." Miss Johnson was from Massachusetts. *The National Freedmen*, I (December 15, 1865), 382-383; Letter to Comm. Oliver O. Howard from Asst. Comm. T. W. Osborn, November 1, 1865, in B.R.F. and A.L.
  16. Cotton was a major factor in the diplomatic history of the South during the Civil War. It was believed that a shortage of cotton would force England and France to render aid to the Confederacy. In order to insure the scarcity of cotton, many bales were burned, and the Confederate Congress "passed a joint resolution that absolutely no cotton ought to be planted in 1862." Frank L. Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy* (Chicago, 1931), 47.
  17. The Commissioner of Lands for Florida, in 1874, reported that before and during the war Marion County produced more sugar and sea island cotton than any county of the State, "nor does it produce a less quantity of these articles under the present system of free

Of all the country through which we passed I do not think more than one tenth would be regarded such as to reward well the labor of the tiller of its soil, while not one hundredth part of the country passed through is under any attempt at cultivation.<sup>18</sup>

LUMBERING

Along the banks of the St. Johns River and the gulf coast of the County of Hernando, something is being done or proposed to be done this year, but very little or nothing during the last.

At present prices, lumbering promises the best and readiest return of any business.

Twelve dollars per thousand is given for lumber delivered in the log at the mill.

Lumber, selling at thirty dollars per thousand, enables all parties to realize large profits, and pay high prices for labor at the same time. Of course these profits will be proportionate to the nearness and facility of market

*Moral Condition of the People*

This is the gloomiest picture to behold.

Physical decay and devastation, consequent upon the war-ruined and deserted homes-prostration of business - hop[e]lessness of the future-bereavement of those too poor . . . to purchase the habiliments of mourning - too proud to confess the guilt that caused their grief, and too hateful to love what they can not possess - these and such as these, are the burdens, self-imposed, of the people of the district through which I passed. I speak of

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labor." *Sixth Annual Report of the Commissioner of Lands and Immigration of the State of Florida, for the year ending December 31, 1874* . . . (Tallahassee, 1874) 143.

18. The statement that little of the soil of East Central Florida was under cultivation is not surprising. The population of the counties visited by Kinne was sparse. In 1860 there were only 15,242 whites in the eight counties under consideration, and only a few more by 1870. Colonel John T. Sprague, in December, 1866, wrote of a frontier in Florida extending from Tampa Bay east as far as St. Augustine. Letter to Comm. Oliver O. Howard from Asst. Comm. John T. Sprague, December 31, 1866, in B.R.F. and A.L.; *Eighth Census*, I, 55.

the masses. True there are exceptions, but none have entirely escaped.<sup>19</sup>

Present pressing demands of natural wants will stimulate action and energy in a people, whose moral condition is measurably unimpaired. But the remedies for this condition, it seems to me[,] lie beyond the reach of the people we commiserate. Without any school system, without a pure gospel - this people have lived and suffered up to the time of the Rebellion, and since that time have experienced more than a want of these. In one county, known to be loyal, there has not been a sermon preached in four years. From observations and information carefully gathered, I have formed . . . the deliberate opinion that the *next to the last* thing that will be reconstructed, in this portion of the State, will be the school system, and the last, will be the religious organizations.

Dissatisfied, as many may be, with the present status of these vital interests, they desire to be let alone. Public opinion, as measured by numerous private and individual opinions, is set against any and all efforts on the part of Northern individuals and associations, to ameliorate or reconstruct.

They would doubtless accept of pecuniary aid, if so proffered as not to place them in the seeming attitude of beneficiaries. Such is the spirit of the people, generally that the promise, to "the poor in spirit" must be with conditions. They are not poor in *Spirit!*

Occasionally some persons offer to open a school for the children of the white people, but too often this is done by persons whose qualifications for such work are either unknown or insufficient. And this is the best that can be hoped for, for a long time.<sup>20</sup> The few ministers, resident, are an insufficient supply for

19. In regard to the destruction of the Civil War once Florida historian wrote that "destruction of property in the state was appalling. Real and personal property exclusive of slaves shrank from an assessed value of \$47,000,000 in 1860 to \$27,000,000 in 1865. The loss of slave property was estimated at \$22,000,000. Such losses were fairly well distributed, permitting few of the population to escape." Kathryn T. Abbey, *Florida Land of Change* (Chapel Hill, 1941), 293.

20. The opportunities for education of white children were so limited that they sometimes attended Negro schools provided by the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern organizations. For example, in December, 1867, it was reported that ten white children attended Negro schools in Fernandina, two in Jacksonville, and one in Palatka. In March and April, 1868, it was reported that one white in Putnam County

the great demand herein indicated. The condition of the poorer class of whites is as deplorable as that of the blacks.

Remove from off the freedman the bitter hate and prejudice which seems to be intensified now that he is free, and his condition will be rapidly improved. He is poor. He has always been poor, hence does not feel his poverty. He is hopeful because free. Hopeful of the future, for the means of education which he has heard is open to him - for the right to life and property which he supposes is involved in his lately acquired freedom. These stimulants to him, operate inversely to the white laborer and excite their jealousy if not hatred.<sup>21</sup>

My observations impel me to state before closing this report, that the ends of justice to the freedmen can be met only by a wise and careful watchfulness of his interests by those who are his friends, who believe in his humanity, and who will steadily, wisely and persistently push aside that prejudice which now jeopardizes the rights which his humanity involves.

Respectfully Submitted

A. E. Kinne

Agt. B.R.F. & A.L.

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attended school with Negroes, five at St. Peters Parish School in Nassau County, and two at Lincoln School in Jacksonville. *Teacher's Monthly School Reports* in B. R. F. and A. L.

21. Many observations of the period indicate that the greatest hostility toward the Negro came from the poorer whites. For example, General Israel Vogdes wrote in July, 1865, that the "poor whites" hated "the planters and the Negroes, envying the first and fearing the last." Another observer stated that the white man's "hatred of 'yankees and niggers,' seem to be in direct proportion to the depth of their ignorance, and the length of time that has elapsed since they last saw a newspaper." Osborn reported in January, 1866, that the feeling toward the freedmen "among the little planters, lawyers, . . . the cracker and other small fry is contemptible while the substantial planters have a degree of consideration for the former slaves that could hardly be expected." Letter to Comm. Oliver O. Howard from Brig. Gen. Israel Vogdes, July 31, 1865; Letter to Comm. Howard from Asst. Comm. T. W. Osborn, January 10, 1866; Letter to Lt. Allan H. Jackson from W. L. Apthorp, September 16, 1867 in B.R.F. and A.L.