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The Editor's Corner--A Plan to Homestead Freedmen in Florida in 1866

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THE EDITOR'S CORNER

Notes and Documents

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A Plan to Homestead Freedmen in Florida in 1866

Edited by F. BRUCE ROSEN

AT THE CONCLUSION of the Civil War, a number of plans were presented for the colonization of freedmen.¹ Of particular interest to Floridians is one suggested to Major General Oliver Otis Howard, commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, by the assistant commissioner of the Bureau for Florida, Brevet Colonel Thomas W. Osborn.

Colonel Osborn was originally appointed assistant commissioner of Alabama, but because of an accident which would not allow him to take up his duties on time he was reassigned to Florida. Osborn was only thirty years of age at the time of his Florida assignment and was a particular favorite of Commissioner Howard, having served as his chief of artillery at Gettysburg.² After serving as Florida bureau chief for less than a year, Osborn settled in Tallahassee, where he practiced law and began playing an active role in Florida politics.³

Colonel Osborn was a man of considerable insight who worked well with both the military and the elected state officials. If any criticism can be leveled at him, it is that he subjugated himself to the military and made the bureau a branch of the federal forces in Florida which were then commanded by General J. G.

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1. George R. Bentley, *A History of the Freedmen's Bureau* (Philadelphia, 1955) 97; O. O. Howard, *Autobiography of General Oliver Otis Howard*, 2 vols. (New York, 1907), II, 229-44, 281.
 2. *Biographical Directory of the American Congress: 1774-1961* (Washington, 1961), 1410; Bentley, *History of the Freedmen's Bureau*, 60; Howard, *Autobiography*, II, 218.
 3. *Biographical Directory of the American Congress*, 1410; William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913), 380-81.

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Foster.⁴ Power conflicts were few and appear in most instances to have been settled amicably between Osborn and Provisional Governor William Marvin and, later, Governor David S. Walker.⁵

The following plan, proposed in a letter from Osborn to Howard, shows both Osborn's grasp of the potential of Florida and his careful administrative planning.

* * *

Office Assistant Commissioner
Bureau Refugees Freedmen and Abandoned Land
Tallahassee, Fla. January 1, 1866⁶

Howard Maj. Gen. O. O.
Commissioner B.R.F.&A.L.

General:

I would respectfully call your attention to a plan of colonization for the freedpeople, in southern Florida to which I have given consideration. I think if it is the intention to colonize these people, a thoroughly organized method of proceeding and one of sufficient capacity to meet all the requirements that may arise, especially that of determining their capacity for education and eventually self-government, would be much better than to set off a comparatively small portion of territory for this purpose.

Let me propose a plan for your consideration. The United States shall purchase of Florida that portion south of the 28th parallel of latitude, which will include the counties of Hillsboro [*sic*], Brevard, Manatee, Munroe [*sic*], Dade and Polk (a new

4. Bentley, *History of the Freedmen's Bureau*, 129.

5. This is the judgment of Bentley, *History of the Freedmen's Bureau*, 129. It is not shared by Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida*, 405, who says, "The state government and the Bureau were in conflict before the end of the first sixty days of the reorganized government's existence." The Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, May 25, 1866, seems to support Bentley's interpretation. See also David S. Walker to Osborn, May 11, 1866. Letters received, Assistant Commissioner, September 15, 1865 to September 21, 1866, in Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, Florida, National Archives. (Microfilm of original in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville).

6. Osborn to Howard, January 1, 1866. Letters sent of Assistant Commissioner, September 15, 1865 to September 21, 1866, in Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, Florida, National Archives. (Microfilm of original in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville.) Cited hereafter as Bureau Records.

county between Hillsboro and Brevard) and give it a territorial organization and government. The lands shall then be held exclusively for homesteads for freedpeople.⁷

This territory has about 600 townships, (21,600 sq. miles), after deducting the several harbors, bays, lakes, swamps and everglades, will have about 400 townships (14,400 sq. miles) fit for pre-emption by actual settlers. Perhaps a little more. I think no less. The climate is tropical, frost seldom appearing below Tampa never at Cape Sable, and the whole territory is well adapted to the culture of nearly all the tropical fruits and the productions of the West Indies. The coast has several good harbors. Tampa Charlotte Harbor, Bahia Ponce de Leon, White Water Bay, Key Biscayne Bay, Jubilee [*sic*] Inlet,⁸ Indian River and the lesser Harbors in abundance. The St. Johns River is navigable to Lake Washington which would afford this territory water transportation northward. The Indian River and the Kissimmee River are navigable. Lake Okee-cho-bee has a surface of thirty miles by forty miles. The soil of this country is productive, the timber is very valuable and the coast of this territory abounds in fisheries not surpassed by any in the world. The great cattle herds of the State are in this territory, and the cattle now feeding there are estimated at a half-million.⁹ By cultivation this territory, I am led to believe might be made one of the most, if not the most, valuable of any tract in the U. States of the same

7. The Freedmen's Bureau bill of January 1866 included a provision for the reservation of 3,000,000 acres of land in the southern states for homesteading freedmen. It was vetoed by President Johnson and Congress was unable to secure the necessary vote to override the veto. On July 16, 1866, a new bureau bill was passed into law over the presidential veto. See Howard, *Autobiography*, II, 281-82. About this same time, the Southern Homestead Act of June 1866 became law. The more than three thousand homesteads taken up in Florida under this act led to a heavy increase in Florida's Negro population. Bentley, *History of the Freedmen's Bureau*, 134, 144-46; Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida*, 451.

8. Probably Jupiter Inlet.

9. In 1860, all livestock in Florida totalled 714,316 animals valued at \$5,553,356 of which only 388,060 were cattle. U.S. Bureau of Census, *Eighth Census of the U.S.: 1860, Agriculture* (Washington, 1864), 18-19. By 1870, the number of animals for the entire state had declined to 597,159 valued at \$5,212,157. Of this number only 390,915 were cattle. In the counties proposed to be reserved for freedmen there were only 16,449 cattle in 1870 out of a total of livestock in the six counties of 190,683 animals valued at \$1,019,657. U.S. Bureau of Census, *Ninth Census of the U.S.: 1870, Agriculture* (Washington, 1874), 116-17.

number of acres. From all that I have been able to learn since I have been in the State, I do not think I overestimate the value of this country, and the U.S. at large demands that it should be developed as the tropical fruit growing region of the country.

My views are that each head of family should be allowed to have by settling it, as provided in the Homestead Bill, eighty acres of land, that each township when opened for settlement, shall be settled before another is allowed to be opened, except such land as is unfitted for cultivation.

By adopting this method the territory would be settled as we go and prevent the settler from occupying more than 80 acres.

It would be much better to provide against the settlers selling the lands then settled in less than ten years. There are many reasons for this, among which are to provide a permanent home for these people, until they have learned the value and responsibilities of being property holders, to make society permanent, to give time to educate them to self-government, to give the children the quiet of society necessary for education, to counteract the tendency of the freedmen from accumulating about the towns etc.¹⁰ The provisions of the Homestead Bill, otherwise than the amount of land given the settlers and the number of years he is to occupy it before acquiring a full title, are sufficient. By this method of settlement we would get on a section of 640 acres 8 families, in a township, 288 families and upon the 400 townships 115,200 families, with five members to each family we should have 575,000 people. I give these figures to show the capacity of the country and give each family a home of 80 acres.

This perhaps is more territory than is requisite for this purpose. But on the other hand it would be ample to make a home for all the surplus freedpeople in all the states. By this system of colonization the surplus colored people from all cities, towns and planting communities could be easily provided with homes and the Districts where they now are, be in many cases relieved of a great incumbrance.

If the territorial government is made wholesome and firm

10. Upon first hearing they were free, many freedmen left the plantations either to follow the army or to congregate in the cities where from time to time they held mass meetings and caused serious disturbances. Ralph L. Peek, "Lawlessness and the Restoration of Order in Florida, 1868-1871" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 1964), 37-40.

I do not think the colony would be burdensome or expensive to the United States. The revenue from such a colony when developed will be great.

I think if there is an earnest intention on the part of Congress to make a trial of colonization it would be far preferable to purchase the territory and give it a government under the direct supervision of the General Government.

It is not to be expected that any southern state will deal justly in her legislation toward any colony of freedmen sent upon its territory under the supervision of the U.S. I am sure if attempted it will result in disappointment. This state has an abhorrence of the idea of a colony of negroes within its limits.

I am General
Very Respectfully
Your obt. servt.
T. W. Osborn

Colonel and Asst. Com.
Bureau R. F. and A. L.

Office Assistant Commissioner
Bureau Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands
Tallahassee, Fla. January 1, 1866 ¹¹

Howard Maj. Gen. O. O.
Commissioner B.R.F.&A.L.

General:

I respectfully submit the following summary of the plan proposed for colonizing freedmen in the accompanying letter, to be.

- I. The United States to purchase of Florida that portion of the territory south of the 28 degree of latitude.
- II. To organize it into a territory and give it a territorial form of Government.
- III. To provide for its being settled by Freedmen each head of a family to have 80 acres, and none but freedmen to be allowed to purchase lands or pre-empt them in this territory.
- IV. This whole territory has about 600 townships (21,600 sq. miles), exclusive of Rivers, Lakes and swamps, there are 400

11. Osborn to Howard, January 1, 1866, Bureau Records.

townships (14,400 sq. miles), or about 9,000,000 acres of lands fit for settlement. This would settle 115,000 families each with a homestead of 80 acres.

I am General

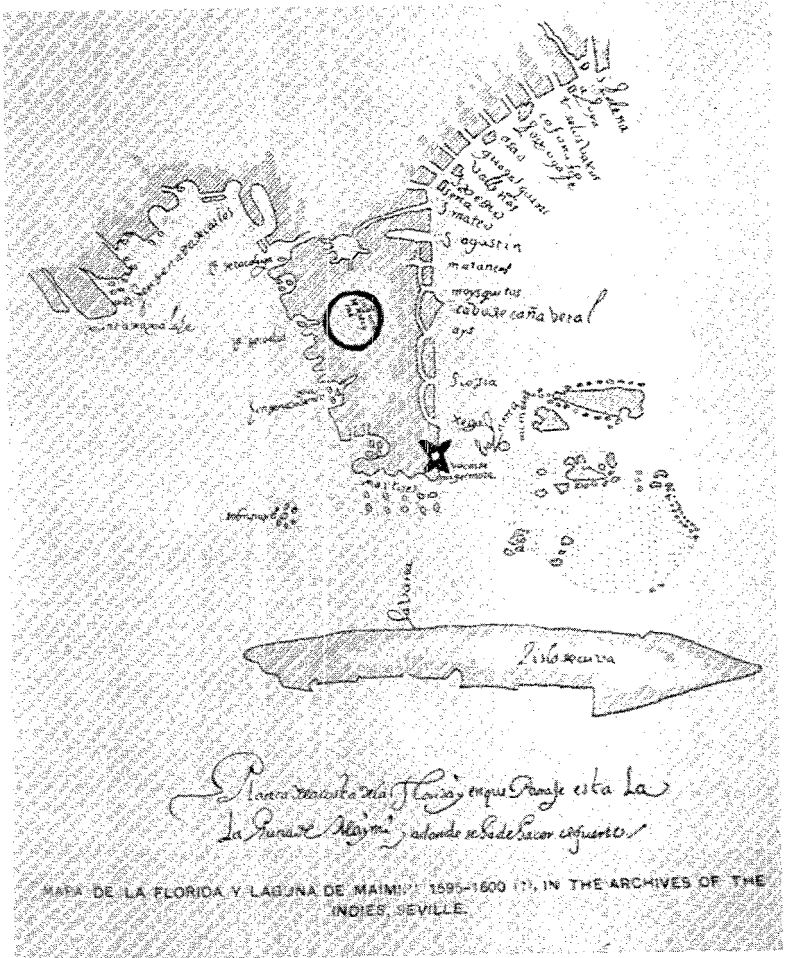
Very Respectfully

Your obt. servt.

T. W. Osborn

Colonel and Asst. Com.

Bureau R. F. and A. L.



Reproduced from Woodbury Lowery, *The Spanish Settlements within the Present Limits of the United States. Florida, 1562-1574* (New York & London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905).