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“OR THIS WHOLE AFFAIR IS A FAILURE”: A SPECIAL TREASURY AGENT’S
OBSERVATIONS OF THE PORT ROYAL EXPERIMENT, PORT ROYAL, SOUTH
CAROLINA, APRIL TO MAY, 1862

A thesis submitted to
The Graduate College of
Marshall University
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
History
by
Michael Edward Scott Emmett
Approved by
Dr. Michael Woods, Committee Chairperson
Dr. Robert Deal
Dr. Tyler Parry

Marshall University
July 2016

APPROVAL OF THESIS

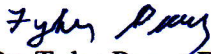
We, the faculty supervising the work of Michael Edward Scott Emmett, affirm that the thesis, "*Or This Whole Affair Is A Failure*": *A Special Treasury Agent's Observations of the Port Royal Experiment, Port Royal, South Carolina, April to May, 1865*, meets the high academic standards for original scholarship and creative work established by the Masters of History Program and the College of Liberal Arts. This work also conforms to the editorial standards of our discipline and the Graduate College of Marshall University. With our signatures, we approve the manuscript for publication.



Dr. Michael Woods, Department of History Committee Chairperson July, 8, 2016



Dr. Robert Deal, Department of History Committee Member July 8, 2016



Dr. Tyler Parry, Department of African American Studies (California State University,
Fullerton) Committee Member July 8, 2016

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come my way and make me happy and confident. I did all this for you two and you have been worth the sacrifices! Thank you Stacy, Michael, and Abigail for your love, smiles, and support as Daddy sought to fulfill a dream of his. We did it!

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ABSTRACT

This thesis covers two critical months (April and May, 1862) during the Port Royal Experiment, which took place during the Civil War in the Sea Islands of South Carolina. This abolitionist-influenced experiment has been enriched by numerous primary sources from a range of people: military officials, General Superintendents of the Treasury, abolitionists and educators. However, this topic has been missing one important source: Special Treasury Agents. These men implemented the orders of various groups involved with the Experiment. The unpublished papers of one such agent, James Severance, provides a new depth in Port Royal analysis. This firsthand account shows the results of conflicting orders among the ex-slaves and the Agents themselves, something not accounted for from previous historians. The Agents were exhausting and vilifying themselves by associating themselves to antebellum slave drivers, which led some to want to leave the Experiment. At the same time the ex-slaves resisted efforts by these groups to plant cotton and wanted consistency as to whether they were free or not. They were told they were free, but were both told later they really were not free and treated poorly in a pseudo-slavery condition brought by the Union occupation of the Sea Islands. Tragically, they also reveal that the Experiment was on the road to what could be a violent pre-mature conclusion within a couple of months after it began if drastic changes did not take place and fast. Fortunately, the Experiment did not fail because changes as consolidating management. Emphasis on cotton lessened, and the Emancipation Proclamation officially made the Sea Islands slaves freemen took place quickly. However, James Severance is the only primary source to reveal such a reality in the 1862.

INTRODUCTION

On April 12, 1862, Cleveland-born, Boston-raised, Special Treasury Agent James Severance sailed onboard the *Oriental* with other Agents and abolitionists from Boston and New York. They sailed towards their new home and workstation of Beaufort, South Carolina. Located amongst the Sea Islands of the South Carolina Lowcountry just north of the Georgia border, these islands were occupied by a joint Federal Navy-Army force on November 7, 1861. On this April day, Severance found himself observing Charleston Harbor and wrote that, “the centre (sic) is occupied by the old Fort Sumter-just one year ago today was the attack on this fort and today the rebel rag can be seen with a glass, floating over it.” “Little did I think, a year ago, now to be off this very place, and who then thought the [Confederates] would now hold this position unmolested!”¹ Sailing on, Severance arrived and landed in Beaufort on the 14th day of April, where he would participate in the abolition-driven, yet Treasury and War Department-run Port Royal Experiment. As he was assigned to work under both the Treasury and military, this man from an abolitionist family would record not just his work or his thoughts while assigned, but also of others during the Experiment which lasted from 1862 to 1865.

This Experiment started after the Union occupation of the Sea Islands that took from November 1861 to February 1862 to complete. The Federal government was left with over 10,000 slaves and recently planted cotton to deal with. So, it sought a way to continue the planting of cotton and prepare these slaves for citizenship. What we know today about this Experiment was that it was imperfect, but the best effort given towards enfranchising, educating, and making wage laborers of ex-slaves. This would be applied to postwar Reconstruction when the Southern states, once defeated, would be transformed to function as the Northern States;

¹ James S. Severance, Journal. April 12, 1862, 4. Severance Family Papers. Private Collection, Shepherd, MT.

namely having enfranchised male voters, both black and white, the system of wage labor established, and free men making up the society for each state. The literature and research into the Experiment relied on the manuscripts of the educator-abolitionists, or “Gideonites” and the heads of the military and Treasury garrisoned in the Sea Islands. What has been missing are the recordings of James Severance and other Special Treasury Agents who had to carry out the orders of the military and Treasury. These Agents also had the most direct contact, along with the Gideonites, with the black populace. Severance’s privately held and unpublished papers reveal a time, specifically during the months of April and May 1862, where the Experiment could have floundered and the hopes of both whites and blacks would be dashed. The Special Treasury Agents, via Severance’s words, reveal that they worried the Experiment would fail if the ex-slave population was not treated as the freedpeople they had been told they now were, if the government persisted in the cotton trade, and if the military did not change its recruiting tactics. Severance anticipated that if these changes were not made, the local blacks would resist any effort made by the Union in Port Royal and never trust the Union officials again.

Although historians argue these same conclusions, as will be seen below in more detail, they look at those published primary sources we do have from the top-down lens in terms of management. Meaning, most, if not all, of their primary sources come from those giving orders. In their studies we read from the words of Superintendents and Supervisors such as Edward Pierce and Edward Philbrick and of military leaders such as Major General David Hunter. We are also fortunate to have the diaries and letters of abolitionists and educators such as Laura Towne, Charlotte Forten, and Reverend Mansfield French. Furthermore modern historians like Julie Saville and Akiko Ochiai, provide us with a modicum of the bottom-up lens by bringing

forth what actions, words, and cultural norms of the black population they can muster.

Something is missing however.

Our ability to truly understand what took place in Port Royal is still hindered: our bottom-up view of things is still incomplete. Incomplete because no where in the literature can be found writings and observations of Special Treasury Agents—of men like James Severance. They were the ones acting out the orders of their superiors and working one-on-one with slaves by way of fieldwork and land ownership. We know the frustrations of the people on top when orders and plans fell through, yet what were the Agents thinking about these orders? How were they reacting to them? What did they say about the reactions of the ex-slave population? What do they reveal about the state of affairs of the Experiment? After reviewing the literature of the Port Royal Experiment, it can only be concluded that we need these Special Treasury Agents words. These papers will show that the fragility of the early years of the Experiment was worse than originally concluded. They even offer a foreshadowing, since neglected by historians, of how postwar Reconstruction could pan out if the government could only make some specific changes (even do without certain policies) like the ones listed above.

Severance's Papers directly reveal that what he and other Agents thought they came to do when they came to the Lowcountry to do and what they were ordered to do, were complete opposites. As government employees, Severance and fellow Agents did not like how their employer was running the Experiment, even to the point that they desired the government stop interfering. By interference, there should be less oversight by government, which would lessen its grip on the Sea Island people and allow more autonomy for both Agents and ex-slaves. Although they came under the authority of the Treasury to extract money from secessionist properties to fund the war (which also punished the rebellious population), they found

themselves immersed in cotton trade—another form of funding the war and feed the Northern mills. They felt this trade was obstructing the dreams of a people yearning for freedom. For them, cotton production just needed to go away. Also to an extent, they reveal in greater and more personal detail the action of Major General Hunter's recruitment of the male populace and its effects that, as noted, we tend to from the top-down view.

These criticisms would seem odd since these Agents owed their jobs to the Treasury, yet, as will be argued in greater detail in the following chapters, the Agents felt that they were becoming the overseer on plantations for the new master, the government. A pseudo-slavery ethic was in force, while they claimed to free a race of people. This did not bode well for these Agents in Port Royal. Severance quoted a few of these Agents that declared what they were doing was not what they had signed up to do.

The literature review will show the evolution of analyzing Port Royal and how the treatment of Special Treasury Agents have changed over time, even when there are no Special Treasury Agents in Port Royal to cite. The review will also, as noted, show how historians have relied mainly on the managerial version of events, with some laborer views (what we do have from the freedpeople), but not those Northerners doing the work of the government.

Following the review we will compare the Port Royal Experiment with other experiments that occurred during the war: the Red River Campaign (included parts of Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas), New Orleans, and Davis Bend, Mississippi. Here we have some writings of Special Treasury Agents in these locations, yet not in Port Royal. We also can see that these other experiments too had times of near doom, yet they all suffered in different ways. While the Severance papers give us the missing link to Port Royal, it now places Port Royal with these other experiments in terms of being complete with their primary sources. Moreover, they can

now help historians see a trend in the pitfalls of government interference and the cotton trade; that as these experiments provided precedence for Reconstruction after the war, it can now be connected that these same pitfalls foreshadowed the failures of Reconstruction. Such connections are now fully realized thanks to the account of James Severance, which now completes the study of Port Royal, as the accounts of Treasury Agents in the three other experiments have completed those studies for a number of years now.

Historiography

W.E.B. Du Bois in his 1935 work, *Black Reconstruction in America*, mostly serves as an example of how historiography has evolved regarding Reconstruction, Special Treasury Agents and Port Royal. This large study comparing all Southern states and their Reconstruction, sets out that though it was right to free the slaves and give them rights as American citizens, the work of Reconstruction and the work done by Reconstruction's employees was more bad than good for the freedpeople. He asserts that the government workers and both federal and state policies worried more about making a profit instead of uplifting the poor freedpeople. Du Bois also accuses the government of not doing more to protect the freedpeople from vengeful Southerners and did more to reaffirm white Southerners into politics instead. It should be noted that Du Bois does have a chapter that does focus on South Carolina as a whole, yet the South Carolina chapter, and the other state-centric ones, begin in 1866, so Port Royal plays no role nor was mentioned in his tome.²

John Hope Franklin's 1947 book, *From Slavery to Freedom*, is on par with Du Bois—though less accusatory, and a bit more forgiving. Nonetheless, he sees Reconstruction and Port Royal as stolen by corrupt men. In some instances, Port Royal was a failure more than success

² W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1935).

because of the same reasons Du Bois asserts, yet Franklin still believes that good was done on behalf of the people—they were free, more or less, and a way was open, yet narrow, for their success in postwar America.³

With Port Royal being mentioned in Franklin’s work that is as far as it goes. There is no deep analysis or research given to Port Royal. Port Royal as seen, or not seen, in the two works above play a minute, if any, role in the larger drama of emancipation, Reconstruction and Civil Rights.

What is interesting about these first two works is that their perceptions of Reconstruction and Special Treasury Agents sound awfully like the first school of thought concerning this era: the Dunning School, named after Columbia professor, William Dunning. This school took the side of the Redeemers, those Southerners that “saved” the South from blacks, the carpetbaggers from the North, and Scalawags (Southern Republicans). By taking this side, Reconstruction is seen as an evil perpetrated by greedy Yankee and Yankee (and Negro) supporting people ruining the South with their tyranny. One of their favorite targets, outside of Washington, D.C., was those Special Treasury Agents turned carpetbaggers. However, with Du Bois and Franklin being African-American, placing them with Dunning is a mistake. As for the former, his negative views come from his Marxian ideology of economics and the unity of laborers. For Du Bois, capitalistic greed and capital-loving white men betrayed blacks and Reconstruction. For Franklin, he may not be Marxian, but his view of the Agents is more of a reflection that

³ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Knopf, 1947).

Dunning-esque thought still prevailed in some form, for both races, but was not fully accepted anymore by the time Hope writes his book.⁴

The next major work on the topic, published 18 years after John Hope Franklin's, which also does not focus on Port Royal solely but singles out South Carolina, was written during the Revisionist school of thought on Reconstruction. This school saw Reconstruction positively in that it was a great agent of change on behalf of the freedmen of the South, which also benefitted the poor whites more than originally believed. Although this revisionism also had criticisms with Reconstruction, in that it did not go far enough and that it was abandoned to vengeful whites, the accomplishments outweighed the failures. Joel Williamson's *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861-1877*, published in 1965, gives more attention to Port Royal, because Williamson sees these wartime years as critical years to the work general Reconstruction in South Carolina. These years helped set the stage for South Carolina's policies following the war (at least in the Lowcountry). Williamson argues that although in the end Reconstruction failed, it was a period of great improvement and progress for the ex-slave and it began in Port Royal. Even with the failed ending, Reconstruction should be praised.⁵

His book came out at the same time as Willie Lee Rose's *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment*. With Rose's book, there was finally a work that focused on the Port Royal Experiment exclusively, thus giving it the spotlight it needed in American history. Though not a profound shift, this work would start changing the tone in how historians view the policies and employees of the Federal government during the Civil War and Reconstruction. This work

⁴ An excellent example of the Dunning School can be found in Claude Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution After Lincoln* (New York: The Literary Guild of America, 1929).

⁵ Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861-1877* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965).

by historian Willie Lee Rose coined the Experiment as “The Rehearsal for Reconstruction”, while also serving as the title of her phenomenal study on Port Royal published in 1965.⁶ Her work set the stage for Port Royal studies and its historiography. Without it, one cannot begin to start a work on this topic. Ever since Rose’s work, there are many more works (be they books or articles for academic journals) on Civil War-era Port Royal Experiment and its role in the Reconstruction of South Carolina. Using vast and various sources of mainly supervisors from the government and abolitionists, historian Willie Lee Rose writes that the Experiment became the model for how the enslaved were to transition into liberty. Under the Treasury and War departments, Northerners—mostly abolitionists mixed with educators, cotton traders and businessmen, were to help train the newly freed slaves how to work for a wage and prepare them for citizenship through reading, writing, and some civic lessons. Within the introduction and first chapter of Rose’s classic work on the Experiment, this effort is coined a ‘mini-revolution’.⁷ By building on Rose’s work, recent historians, such as Bruce Levine in, *The Fall of the House of Dixie* (2014), argues that the Experiment helped in ushering the transformation of the Old South, and America as a whole. The Experiment was one of several factors to make this transformation possible.⁸

Julie Saville’s 1994 work, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina 1860-1870*, proves insightful due to her study on the conversion of slave to wage labor in all of South Carolina. Here, she focuses on the enslaved turned free and how they

⁶ Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: the Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).

⁷ Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, xi-32.

⁸ Bruce Levine, *The Fall of the House of Dixie: The Civil War and the Social Revolution That Transformed the South* (New York: Random House, 2014), xvii-xix.

viewed the transformation. We read how Port Royal was praised by freedmen, but found wanting in implementation and success. Her work coincides with those of Du Bois and Franklin since she uses the words and views of those slaves and freedpeople living at the time. However, her take on the Port Royal Experiment, the actions and policies of the North, and the result of the conversion from slave to wage does not come out as accusatory or as a damning failure by the ‘white man’ as Du Bois argues. While not perfect for these ex-slaves, without the Experiment this change may never have taken place and it should be acknowledged of what good it did for the people. Of the most unique aspect of her analysis, her discussion on the autonomy these Sea Island slaves had been able to operate the plantations prior to Union occupation provides a key factor into why the implementation of the Experiment was only partially successful.⁹

Eric Foner’s hefty, but invaluable 1988 study on Reconstruction, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution. 1863-1877*, also calls Port Royal a revolution in American history that paved the way for Reconstruction throughout the South. Even if it was not the perfect experiment it was hoped to become. He also notes how Port Royal and Reconstruction added thousands of employees to the Federal government and added layers of bureaucracy, of which both are still in play today.¹⁰

Rose and Levine along with Akiko Ochiai, of Doshisha University in Japan, reveal that the Experiment, throughout the years of 1862 to 1865, was plagued with trouble, confusion, frustration, impatience, and even corruption. There were many instances when those in charge feared failure and abandonment of the Experiment. Ochiai, in her 2001 article published in the

⁹ Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Civil War. 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 23, 50-54.

New England Quarterly,¹¹ presents a new insight in the Experiment, that is, the Northern economic viewpoint. Ochiai takes the confiscation of Confederate abandoned lands as both economic and political incentives for the Northern businessmen and politicians. Not only out of punishment, but the Experiment became a tool for Northern businessmen to transform the South to their liking and though they did some work to help the recently freedpeople, all efforts were to gain more profit for themselves. With these motives, their vision for post-War South brought that corruption and confusion into Port Royal as newly minted U.S. Treasury Special Agents disputed with the military, who had seen both the abolitionists and the Agents as hindrances to their work. Abolitionists in turn grumbled about the former two, but sought to prove their mettle and standing in Port Royal. All three could not get along or had conflicting policies that frustrated the freedpeople in the area, many growing bitter against their “new masters.” Despite all this, argues Ochiai, the Experiment, more or less, worked and what we see today in our economic and political realms is what the North had envisioned.

Ochiai would return to the topic of the Port Royal Experiment in 2004. In *Harvesting Freedom: African American Agrarianism in Civil War Era South Carolina*, where she focuses on the point of view of the freedmen of the area during wartime. Much like Saville’s work, Ochiai’s argument centers on the impact the autonomy these former slaves had been able to work under during the antebellum years. This autonomy allowed the people to assert themselves as new American citizens. However, unlike Saville, Ochiai is not really concerned about the ‘reconstruction’ or transformation of labor as war and Reconstruction came, or by the influence of the Experiment. She argues that this autonomy allowed these freedpeople to prove themselves in ways not expected by the Northerners that came to Port Royal. With the autonomy these Sea

¹¹ Akiko Ochiai, “The Port Royal Experiment Revisited: Northern Visions of Reconstruction and the Land Question,” *New England Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (March 2001): 94-117.

Islands slaves had, which seemed a novelty compared to slaves elsewhere in South Carolina or the South as a whole, they were the closest ones in achieving landownership. They did this by struggling the most for it and being more active in trying to obtain this goal compared to other former slaves. Furthermore, this taste of freedom, of liberty, felt prior to the occupation of the Sea Islands, led the freedmen to expand upon it more through education and a drive for democratic self-rule. Both of which they eagerly sought after once the abolitionist-educators (the “Gideonites”) arrived. All this then culminated in Northerners becoming surprised as this supposed ignorant race proved themselves by purchasing land, organizing themselves into work cooperatives, and in their coherent political activism. As with the imperfect conclusion of the Experiment at war’s end, all the freepeople’s work became frustrated with Reconstruction politics and Southern white resistance stripping their rights or at least blocking them. They would have to fight for a century to get them back.¹²

Kevin Dougherty, adjunct professor at The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina, provides a viewpoint that is original regarding Port Royal. In his 2014 study, *The Port Royal Experiment: A Case Study in Development*, Port Royal is seen as an evolving topic. This study presented for our time, argues that Port Royal was ahead of its time. It was the first time, without quite realizing it, that America set out and applied the doctrine nation building and prepared a people for the return of home-rule, albeit a better rule (hopefully) compared to its predecessor. Dougherty sets out to provide how Port Royal offers both advice and a model for the “do’s and

¹² Akiko Ochiai, *Harvesting Freedom: African American Agrarianism in Civil War Era South Carolina* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 2014).

do not's" of nation-building today—even though no actual 'nation' was built or developed in Port Royal.¹³

Mostly through the works by Williamson, Rose, Foner and Dougherty, the historiographical view of Port Royal and Reconstruction has shifted. Though noting that there was corruption, obstacles towards freedpeople, and failures in Reconstruction, Agents are not seen as evil as a whole and the government not seen as abandoning blacks for whites in the South. Hopes are made from these historians that we can learn from the good, bad and ugly of this era by seeing it as a noble effort by all involved to help this nation during times of crisis—the moral, the political, and the militaristic.

These historians, especially ones dating from Rose on down, credibly argued all this by using mostly the personal papers and published works of those in command of the military and treasury forces, combined with some abolitionists. They do reveal the failures and successes of the Experiment and they do agree that it was imperfect and did not achieve all its goals; but the Experiment was a crucial and needed predecessor that the Federal government could look to and apply as they sought to reconstruct the South postwar.

Comparison: The Red River Campaign And George S. Denison

As for the comparative analysis of other experiments, the first will be about the Red River Campaign, which took place mostly in Louisiana and Texas. Here too, like Port Royal Experiment, there was a Treasury presence to confiscate lands and keep the cotton trade booming. In *Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War*¹⁴ by Ludwell Johnson

¹³ Kevin Dougherty, *The Port Royal Experiment: A Case Study in Development* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Ludwell H. Johnson, *Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press, 1958).

and published in 1958, the Treasury Department, cotton, profit and plain old politics, are interpreted as culprits in causing the war to last as long as it did as well as being the reasons why there ever was a Red River Campaign; a campaign that failed. Johnson points to the corruption of Treasury Agents and how the politics of cotton and votes, not generals, made war plans. Johnson himself was in the era of the school of Reconstruction Revisionism, yet like Du Bois and Franklin, there seems to be a lingering shadow of Dunning that still influenced how they perceived the work of Agents. Although it cannot be confirmed if Dunning still had an influence on Johnson, Johnson does single out a Special Treasury Agent to embody all Agents to make his case: George S. Denison. He even uses some of Denison's writings to condemn him. Du Bois and Franklin did not have a specific Agent to vilify as an embodiment of all Agents.

In *Red River*, Johnson points out that with just about all of southern Louisiana in Union hands, pleas came from Unionists that fled Texas to invade the interior of that state and keep cotton in the area going. He argues that the Lincoln Administration and the officer in charge of the Department of the Gulf,¹⁵ Major General Nathaniel Banks, were more concerned about politics and plagued by greed for cotton. Ever since Union forces held New Orleans and southern Louisiana, efforts were underway to prop up the large number of Unionists to return representatives to Washington, D.C. and take apart the Confederacy politically. The plan to capture the last Confederate port, Mobile, Alabama was delayed for many months as result.

Banks was told by Washington to take Agents along to secure cotton already grown and secure all Confederate lands. In what would horrify people today, it seemed that word was spread that there were Confederate officers and civilians hiding cotton from the Confederate government and they were willing to trade the cotton to the Union—only if allowed to keep a

¹⁵ Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and a portion of the Florida panhandle.

healthy share of the profit and keep their land and slaves. These agents would promise both naval and army officers portions of profit from any cotton and land secured. These promises ended up entirely distracting the invasion force to grab as much cotton and land as could be had and figure out how much they would earn after the campaign came to a close.

In the end, the march up Red River was a disaster. No objective by Union forces was met. Banks returned to New Orleans with some cotton, nothing of happenstance to improve the lot of the enslaved, a demoralized force, and a loss of about 5,500 men to show for it. For Johnson, this avoidable disaster only got men killed and caused the war to last longer—and he damned the greed for cotton and the game of politics.

As for Special Treasury Agent George S. Denison, he was what was wrong with the entire affair. Johnson bluntly accuses Denison of nepotism (since he was a nephew to Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase), bribery, and fraud. With bribery, he states that Denison was unscrupulous in accepting cash and silver “gifts” so that planters and merchants on cotton could more easily obtain the supposed hard-to-get permits and to allow for trade in Union-held Louisiana. As for the claim of a fraud, Johnson states that Denison fooled Banks into thinking that he, Denison, by order from his uncle, had authority over both Treasury and military affairs for the area, when really his authority was for the former. So, Denison, the man who represented all Treasury Agents, was simply a conniving, greedy man that played a large role in getting men killed and prolonged to war...for profit.¹⁶

¹⁶ Johnson, *Red River Campaign*, 15, 53, 62, 69. For a more interesting analysis into the idea that the Union government participated in trade with Confederate officials, military men and civilians, David Surdam, economics professor at Loyola University of Chicago, wrote an excellent article on the matter that leaves it up to the reader to decide if this trade was treasonous or patriotic, even having one judge Lincoln’s role. David Surdam, “Traders or Traitors: Northern Cotton Trading During the Civil War,” *Business and Economic History* 28, Issue 2 (1999): 301-312.

Johnson did not have the final word on Denison, however, as the scholarship on Treasury Agents and the Red River Campaign continued to evolve. In 1993, James Marten of Marquette University wrote, “The Making of a Carpetbagger: George S. Denison and the South, 1854-1866.” Marten relies almost solely on the writings of Denison that are preserved. For Marten, Denison is neither hero nor villain, but simply a man who had a personal goal—to earn a living. The only “villainous” thing about Denison that could be found was not that he was related to Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase but that Chase had him act as a type of spy to report on conditions in Louisiana and Texas. Denison was placed as an Agent in this area was not due to nepotism, but due to the fact that he had lived in Texas and Louisiana for almost seven years prior to the war. This made him ideal in understanding the people and the culture. Denison was not an abolitionist until late in the war, loved the Southern people (but not the institution of slavery), and wanted a better future for the enslaved. In fact, he reported to the authorities about corruption within the ranks. Denison was accused of taking thousands of dollars worth of bribes, but only found guilty of the minor charge of taking a couple hundred dollars based on a technicality. That did not make him an outcast or looked down upon by higher ups, according to Marten. All in all, Marten concluded that Denison was more neutral between hero and villain, yet still a decent man just wanting to make a living in an area of the country he grew to love.¹⁷

The quick contrast between Johnson and Marten’s view of one Treasury Agent does show that opinions by historians were indeed changing, while also acknowledging that vices like greed did plague these wartime Reconstruction experiments, in this case for southern Louisiana and Texas. And this when both are dealing with same primary source, along with some of Salmon P. Chase’s letters to/from Denison.

¹⁷ James Marten, “The Making of a Carpetbagger: George S. Denison and the South, 1854-1866,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, 42 No. 2 (Spring 1993): 133-160.

Comparison: New Orleans

Although this next case is also in Louisiana, it is more focused on New Orleans itself. Major General Nathaniel Banks also plays a significant role here, along with Major General Benjamin Butler. The case of New Orleans also benefits from the papers of George Denison since, as noted, he not only lived in Louisiana for a time, but most of his work was in New Orleans early on. The literature for the New Orleans Experiment also cites other, yet unnamed, Treasury Agents. For example, in John Rodrigue's *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*, he cites from one unnamed Agent (though citing from a report by Major General Banks that was published in 1864), the observation that the freedpeople worked more diligently and returned a higher yield of sugar crop without the help of "white men."¹⁸ However, the main Treasury Agent source on New Orleans is still George S. Denison.

Besides Rodrigue's work, there are number of good books on what went on in New Orleans during the war.¹⁹ For this thesis, only one will be reviewed in length since it is not only the most recent work on southern Louisiana and New Orleans, but it also heavily cites the older works. This book is Dr. Moon-Ho Jung's *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation*.²⁰

New Orleans is special in that it not only served as the launching point of the main thrust of the Red River Campaign, but the city and the surrounding parishes had a strong unionist

¹⁸ John Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 42, quotation from Nathaniel Prentice Banks, *Emancipated Labor in Louisiana* (New York, 1864), 7.

¹⁹ These include: Peyton McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction, The Louisiana Reconstruction* (Princeton, 1978); William Messner, *Freedmen and the Ideology of Free Labor: Louisiana, 1862-1865* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwest Louisiana, 1978); Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984); Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed, 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974).

²⁰ Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press Baltimore, 2006).

presence, the focus was on sugar rather than cotton, and served as the model for political Reconstruction, whereas Port Royal was more social. Lincoln, once New Orleans and southern Louisiana were held in Union hands, wanted the area to quickly reestablish itself into the Federal government, to begin gradual emancipation, and ultimately show the rest of the rebellious South that he, Lincoln, would be lenient as they returned. There were more benefits to be had with the Union, rather than with secession. However, he needed to go about this without upsetting the unionists that were at the same time slave owners.

Most of the issues that plagued the city were political. Corruption did infect the Northerners, as bribery in general did switch hands at various levels of the government and the military. Crop production in New Orleans was sugar, not cotton (though New Orleans was the largest port for cotton trade, cotton was grown more in central and northern Louisiana), but like cotton, its profits were also sought. Lastly, the handling of the freedmen and their status in the city and surrounding parishes were also an issue of methods gone wrong.

Jung, and those he cite, argue that since the Federal government yearned to return this part of Louisiana in order to start rebuilding the nation, every goal and every action towards these goals were centered on the white unionists in the state (and throughout the South), rather than on the Negro population. With the infamous military governor of New Orleans, Ben Butler, the all Confederate-raised black militia (ever willing to fight for the North, even to the point of refusing to defend the city as Union troops marched in), known as the Native Guards, were disbanded and disarmed. Butler feared their mobilization would frighten the whites that needed to be persuaded. However there would be times he reluctantly mobilized some when there was a troop shortage endangered by rebel raids. Butler issued orders for runaway slaves to be returned to their master, unionist masters that it is. Further, he and his replacement Major General

Nathaniel Banks placed the freemen in a type of limbo state. Whereas being neither free nor enslaved, the blacks of New Orleans were compelled by Treasury and military officials to sign contracts to work on the plantations for a wage, usually not all that feasible, to work in the city, or face prison. In essence, it was forced compensated work; again to appease the planters.²¹

During November to December 1862, with rumors of the Emancipation Proclamation floating around, planters complained to Union leaders about the potential loss of their workers and reported rumors of a revolt by the black populace if terms for the latter did not improve. Banks, who had replaced Butler by this point, settled such fears by stating that Union-occupied Louisiana will not be touched by the Proclamation and told the laborers to stay on until their gradual emancipation came when war ended. No side was happy about this, but efforts and deals by the military (with the help of Treasury Agents) between worker and planter went back and forth until war ended in April 1865. Such stressful times were suffered to ensure that New Orleans could still be that model for political Reconstruction by keeping Southern unionists happy to keep them as allies during the war.

Between December 1862 and April 1865, planters tried to maintain laborers without keeping them as slaves, to treat them better, and they were constantly making compromises with their former slaves (now contracted laborers) in order to keep sugar and profit growing. It was not until January 1864 that Banks got rid of the pro-slave provisions in the Union government state's constitution that the slave was now truly free, yet they still had to make contracts under

²¹ Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 56-59. It should be noted that Butler coined runaway slaves in Virginia, while he was posted at Fortress Monroe, as “contrabands of war”. Therefore, the Union could take runaway slaves in to deny the South a military-centric labor force, a policy that later became a Federal policy during the war. With this in mind, it may seem to the non-historian that Butler seemed hypocritical in New Orleans. As noted, this sudden reversal was due to politics—in Virginia the slave master was not only a Confederate officer as well, the slave was used for a military purpose. In New Orleans the master was more than likely a unionist that needed pandering to so that Louisiana could return to the Federal government.

pressure by the military. Negotiations were still made, but the black population was more willing to work, as noted by the Treasury Agent quote found in Rodrigue's book above, for now as free men they finally were able to choose their boss and the military still (again through the Treasury Agent) played the peacekeeper between the two when things grew heated.²²

Historians, with the help of both the top-down view and the bottom-up view, note that politics and greed did cause some serious psychological damage to these two efforts of wartime Reconstruction discussed above, with New Orleans ending with success (enough success in the end to act as the model postwar Reconstruction, although it ended in political defeat for the freedmen by 1877) as much needed changes occurred—especially in regards to how the ex-slave was treated and how the government managed affairs. The work, observations and concerns of Treasury Agents play a role in the changes, even if some Agents validated the consternations of those like Johnson and Du Bois have towards them.

Comparison: The Davis Bend Experiment

The last wartime experiment, this one in Davis Bend, Mississippi, has a great primary source: John Eaton, Army Chaplain-turned Treasury Superintendent.²³ Now, it may seem strange to place Eaton with the bottom-up view of these experiments akin with James Severance since Eaton had the same position as Edward Pierce. However, Eaton, while boss, acted like a man on the ground working with his Agents, seeking both their help and advice, rather than simply ordering them about, and sending reports to D.C.

The Davis Bend Experiment is not only unique, but also bears similarities with the Port Royal Experiment. Davis Bend was actually three types of experiments. The first began around

²² Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 59-62.

²³ John Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen: Reminiscences of the Civil War* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907).

the late 1820's by Joseph Davis, brother to future Confederate President, Jefferson Davis. This first experiment ended where the second took place: during the Civil War. It began in 1862 following Ulysses S. Grant's victories along the Mississippi River and within Mississippi itself. When the war ended, Davis Bend was transferred to Freedmen's Bureau hands from both the military and Treasury hands, where in 1866 the third attempt began. Here a former slave, Benjamin Montgomery, from the Davis plantation itself, purchased the land from his former master and ran the place without the control or interference of the government, military or master. However by the 1870's that too would fail, mainly through the invasion of the Army worm.²⁴

Where wartime Davis Bend is similar to Port Royal is that both were run and protected by the Union military and Treasury (both had slaves abandoned by their masters), both experiments focused mainly on the former slaves and finally, both were set forth as models of the glories of freedmen becoming wage laborers. An added advantage came from the preservation of the cotton trade for Northern mills. However, there was one stark difference. Davis Bend, while trumpeting wage labor, was more an experiment of the prowess of the Republican Party's ideology. Port Royal, although an effort in wage labor, was an experiment founded more on abolitionist principles. One of the best secondary sources for John Eaton and the Davis Bend Experiment is by Steven Ross entitled, "Freed Soil, Freed Labor, Freed Men: John Eaton and the Davis Bend Experiment."²⁵

²⁴ For more information regarding these three Davis Bend Experiments see, Janet Sharp Hermann, *The Pursuit of a Dream* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

²⁵ Steven Joseph Ross, "Freed Soil, Freed Labor, Freed Men: John Eaton and the Davis Bend Experiment." *Journal of Southern History* 44, no. 2 (1978): 213-232. More on the Republican Ideology of wage labor see, Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). It is interesting to note that Ross's title is a take on Foner's.

Joseph Davis imagined his plantation becoming a type of utopia for both slave and planter. By educating his slaves, giving them their school, justice system and means of trade, they would run the plantation with his supervision, not by his coercion. While being granted a lot more autonomy, they were still slaves. As Federal forces advanced on his plantation, he fled and encouraged his slaves to join him but a majority stayed and awaited their liberators. Grant, upon seeing this “utopia,” declared that Davis Bend would serve as a model for a “black paradise”, with added bonuses—it would serve the North politically to prove the advantages of wage labor, humiliate Jefferson Davis by having Davis family land become a community for working freedmen, and the rich soil and cotton crop would continue to furnish the North with the fiber. However, the wartime experiment would be protected and run by the joint venture between military and Treasury. Here is where Army Chaplain, Colonel John Eaton was appointed as Superintendent of the Freedmen by Grant in April 1863. His purpose was to establish refugee camps for both the former slaves of Davis and runaway slaves and to organize a system that would continue cotton production.²⁶

According to Ross’s article, Eaton was allowed free reign in how to establish this “black utopia.” Eaton’s path was based on implementing the Republican ideology of land and labor for the Negro population, in the Davis Bend area by creating independent farms for those deemed “exceptional.” For the newly arrived, infirmed and aged, a communal farm was established. While the former was created to show case the viability of productive black farmers, the latter was to help those unable to have independence without becoming idle. While they worked as a community, Eaton’s agents and the military would provide assistance where able. Both farms relied on protection and initial support, but in the end were to be largely supervised, not

²⁶ Steven Joseph Ross, “Freed Soil,” 215.

controlled. Contrasted with Port Royal, Eaton was not an abolitionist and questioned the moral authority and goals of abolitionists, who had made Port Royal there test case for the moral triumph and validity of their cause. For Eaton, only party ideology had moral suasion for the enslaved to correct the errors slaveholding South.

Eaton's experiment succeeded, at first. Large amounts of baled cotton were ready for trade to for the North, visitors marveled at the adequacy of the "exceptional farmers" and saw that little interference from government proved an incentive for the freedmen to work harder and better compared to when they were enslaved, while still providing themselves with enough subsistence foodstuffs. However, by 1864, the area was flooding with agents for Northern businessmen seeking to obtain confiscated lands for their own use and cotton agents on behalf of the Treasury—the beginnings of government interference. Eaton checked the first group as he issued General Orders to keep lands for the black populace. The second group, however, gained some ground in taking control over trade and production of cotton, while some participated in bribery. In the end, President Andrew Johnson returned lands to former rebels, one being Joseph Davis. Davis, hoping to stem off negative repercussions for taking back lands from his former slaves, and the stigma of swearing the Loyalty Oath, sold his property to his former slave (a talented he once relied on), Benjamin Montgomery in 1866.

Even though Davis Bend was able to fight off agents from Northern business, rebel raids, corruption among Treasury Agents and even the Army Worm, the experiment succumbed to the government. Why? Party members could never accept the idea that the ideologies of the Republican Party succeeded through confiscation of private property and the racism that existed within the ranks. This reality shamed some and they sought to fix that by returning the land to

former owners and have the freedmen work for the return of the property they held during the war. This was the opposite of what Eaton had one when he gave the freedmen the land.

Organization Of Thesis And Conclusion

As can be seen, not only do these three experiments in wartime Reconstruction offer vivid accounts to compare with Port Royal, the ability they have to be analyzed by both top-down and bottom-up angles have proved invaluable in helping us understand fully their successes and failures and why such things occurred. Their completeness for analysis is something Port Royal has been in need of for some time. Now armed with the words of a Port Royal Treasury Agent the analysis of this experiment will be complete. The Experiment will be better suited for a more defined compare and contrast examination with the other wartime experiments.

As for the rest of the thesis, chapters one and two will set the stage for the frantic months of April and May 1862. Chapter one will focus on the Battle and Occupation of Port Royal Sound, the arrival of Edward Pierce to see what was to be done with the land, slaves and cotton of the Sea Islands. His report ushered in the Experiment. Also within the chapter will be a recounting how the influences of Pierce's role in Fortress Monroe, Virginia, the issue of "contrabands", and the Republican Party platform of "Free Labor" had on the Port Royal Experiment. Chapter two will be a short biography on James Severance and his family, the influences his upbringing had upon him, how he obtained the position as Special Treasury Agent, and finally his arrival to Port Royal. Chapters three, four and five, are the meat of this thesis. These chapters, respectively, will focus on April and May as observed by Severance. These chapters will go over his observations of the following: overseeing plantations; the military and Treasury actions towards the black population; the recruitment efforts by Major General David

Hunter; the cotton trade, and what the government needs to do to stop a potential mutiny by the freedmen. Also found will be the observations of fellow Treasury Agents and some of the freedmen as recorded by Severance. The conclusion will reiterate the argument of this thesis, a short recounting of the Experiment from June 1862 to Reconstruction, a postwar biography of Severance and then his postwar observations of the Port Royal Experiment.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BATTLE OF PORT ROYAL SOUND AND THE ORIGINS OF THE PORT ROYAL EXPERIMENT

Introduction

When he was eleven years old, Sam Mitchell, then a slave on Ladies Island, was tending to his master's cows, when he heard what thought to be "t'under rolling," yet noticed that, "dey ain't no cloud." When he ran to his mother to report to her of the fantastical event that was taking place, she gently corrected him. "My Mother say, 'son, ata in't no t'under, dat Yankee come to gib you Freedom." Upon hearing this he said that he, "jump up and down and ran." While working as both an abolitionist and educator in the South Carolina Sea Islands, Laura Towne recorded that the U.S. Naval attack upon the Sea Islands at Port Royal Sound, had been called by the Islands' over 10,000 slaves as the, "Gun shoot at Bay Point." This "Gun shoot" or, the Battle of Port Royal Sound, took place on November 7, 1861. The battle's objective was to gain a southern port for U.S. ships to strengthen the blockade against the South. However, while the Sea Island slaves saw the battle as the commencement of their freedom, the U.S. military and government did not have the emancipation of slaves in their plans for the Port Royal area or for the war. This "Gun Shoot" would inadvertently accelerate the road to emancipation by ushering in the Port Royal Experiment. A battle executed to end the war quickly and preserve the Union would now steer the Union's goals to that path the Sea Island slaves were already thinking about: the freedom of over 4 million slaves. The Sea Islands would be the first test case for such a dramatic social and political transformation of America. While the slaves saw the battle bringing freedom to easily, the efforts of the Port Royal Experiment and those Northerners taking part in it will prove how fragile and difficult it would be to bring that

longed for freedom. Even to the point that many would feel slavery was still just as strong under Union occupation.²⁷

The Battle Of Port Royal Sound

The expedition's target was secret, only known by those in command of the largest naval expedition to date. Each commander of the expeditions' over 60 vessels was given sealed envelopes containing the name of the target. These envelopes were to be opened while at sea as ordered by the expedition's leader, Commodore Samuel Du Pont, or after an emergency, such as the separation of the vessels from one another. The latter struck first, following a fierce storm off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, November 2, 1861. Once opened, the commanders now knew their objective: Port Royal Sound, South Carolina.²⁸ Although scattered, with one vessel lost to the sea and a few more either too damaged to go on or wrecked ashore, the expedition was to continue on and regroup outside Port Royal and prepare to attack.²⁹ One thing that no one involved in the Port Royal Expedition would know was that this attack would bring on the creation of the Port Royal Experiment, and a giant step toward the ultimate emancipation of over 4 million slaves.³⁰

²⁷ Brooks D. Simpson, Stephen W. Sears and Aaron Sheehan-Dean, eds., *The Civil War: The First Year Told By Those Who Lived It* (New York: Library of America 2011) 603-604. Sam Mitchell's recalling of this event was recorded as part of an interview in 1937 as part of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. Rupert Sargent Holland, ed., *Letters and Diary of Laura Towne: Written in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862-1884* (Salem MA: Higginson Book Company, 1912), 85.

²⁸ Port Royal Sound is located 60 miles south of Charleston and 30 miles north of the Georgia/South Carolina border. The Sound is home to numerous Sea Islands (Georgia, off Savannah, as her own set of Sea Islands). These include Hilton Head, Port Royal, Edisto, Phillips, Parris, Hunting, Ladies, Coosaw and others for 21 total. Towns and cities include Beaufort, Port Royal and Frogmore. Many plantations dot the islands.

²⁹ Michael Coker, *The Battle of Port Royal* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013) 16, 24-43.

³⁰ The preparation, battle and aftermath of the Battle of Port Royal will not be discussed in great detail or great length this chapter.

This fleet was an impressive one when it sailed out from Fortress Monroe off the Virginia Coast back in October 29. Due to local Confederate forces in the area hoping to take Monroe, the fleet sailed out of the surrounded Union-held fort and port to both cheers and jeers from the shore. Leaving for an unknown target, the sailors and soldiers onboard transports were only aware that they were to help give teeth to Lieutenant General of the US Army, Winfield Scott's "Anaconda Plan" to strangle the South by sea and land.³¹

To strangle the South, Scott wanted to blockade all Southern ports to both keep blockade-runners from heading to international ports to receive supplies, such as cash and armaments, and to keep foreign vessels from coming into the rebel ports. As these ports were blockaded, Union forces were to conduct amphibious assaults to capture the ports to not just return them to the Union but to cripple the Confederate economy and isolate the rebellious states. As ports were blockaded and captured, Union forces were to also regain control of the Mississippi River and split the South in two. Isolated, divided and economically crippled, Scott's plan could then end the war by capitulation without needing to invade overland and fight pitched battles. The plan was mocked as a feeble one, since no direct action was to be taken against the newly minted Confederate States of America's capital in Richmond, Virginia. Additionally, the Union Navy consisted of only 40 serviceable ships at the time. A quick death by rushing to capture the capital was desired, not a slow death.

Even with the rush to construct more ships of war and to convert any and all vessels they could for service, the plan was still weak. For instance, not only was there are large coastline that ranged from the Chesapeake Bay down to Key West off the southern tip of Florida and all of the

³¹ United States. 1880. *The War of the Rebellion: a compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate armies*. Washington G.P.O., Ser. 1, vol. 51, 369-370, 387.

Gulf Coast,³² there was a scarcity of both nearby coaling stations and ports for vessels to be resupplied and repaired. More insulting for the North, was that blockade-runners were easily slipping by towards potential allies in Europe, and in turn, European ships were making it into Southern ports supplying munitions for the rebellion. By October 29, the Union was able to capture Roanoke Island and Hatteras Inlet off North Carolina and southern Louisiana, just short of New Orleans. Despite this, what was still desired was a deep-water port to serve as both a base of operations and a launching point for invasion into the mainland for the Atlantic fleet.³³

During the month of August in 1861, the Blockade Board was organized in Washington, D.C., to formulate the best plan to strangle the South via the “Anaconda Plan” (coined after the Anaconda snake that would coil around and slowly strangle its victim before eating it). They did this by selecting the best points of interests along the Confederate coast that would become those sorely needed coaling stations and bases for attacks. After much deliberation, there were three candidates: Bull’s Bay, St. Helena Sound, and Port Royal Sound,³⁴ all located along South Carolina’s shore. Port Royal was then selected as the ideal location due to its natural deep water harbor; width between islands to allow for naval traffic; structures available for military use; suitable for constructing new buildings such as wharfs, and most important of all, it was situated nicely between Charleston, the birthplace of secession, and another apt location for the navy, Savannah, Georgia. Also to be noted about the area before the Board broke up their meeting

³² Stretching from the Texas/Mexico border to the coast of western Florida.

³³ Coker, *Port Royal*, 9-15; James McPherson *War on the Waters: The Union & Confederate Navies, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 31-36.

³⁴ St. Helena and Port Royal Sounds lie just few miles from each other.

selecting Port Royal, was the wealth contained in the area due to the popular sea-island cotton—a lucrative locale for the profit of some.³⁵

With Port Royal the target, the Board also divided the blockade into different squadrons for easier maintenance of both ships and war plans. They created three departments: the North Atlantic,³⁶ the South Atlantic,³⁷ and the Gulf Coast.³⁸ The South Atlantic command was given to Commodore Samuel Du Pont. Du Pont hoped to not just simply provide the navy with the much-needed base and coaling station; he saw his attack and capture of Port Royal as a type of reprisal on behalf of the United States for the disaster at Bull Run earlier in the year on July 21.³⁹

As the fleet gathered in slowly in small groups in front of Port Royal Sound on November 4, Du Pont and the commander of the army regiments for the invasion, Thomas W. Sherman (often referred to as “The Other Sherman”), made final plans for the attack. However, the Army was to stay in the background for with a number of transports and vessels carrying their munitions indisposed, there was not enough men or ordinance for the combined Navy-Army attack that was originally planned. The Navy would go it alone to clear the way for the Army to mop up what resistance would remain. Du Pont would head into the Sound, and in an elliptical maneuver heading counter-clockwise, would bombard the Sound’s only coastal defenses, Forts Walker and Beauregard. The attack would begin the next day, May 5, but Du

³⁵ Coker, *Port Royal*, 14-15; McPherson, *Waters*, 37; E. Millbury Burton, *The Siege of Charleston, 1861-1865* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), 66-67.

³⁶ Ranging from the Chesapeake Bay to the North Carolina/South Carolina border.

³⁷ Located between where North/South Carolina borders meet to Key West, Florida.

³⁸ This department would control its namesake. U.S. Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, would further divide the Gulf Squadron into the East Gulf (Key West to Pensacola off the Florida panhandle) and the West Gulf (Pensacola to the Texas/Mexico border) Squadrons.

³⁹ Coker, *Port Royal*, 9.

Pont's flagship, the USS *Wabash*, struck a sandbar. The 6th of November would be the new day of attack. However, a small storm came through, postponing the attack once again. Frustrated, Du Pont decided that the new date of November 7 would be the day of the attack, no matter what occurred. Fortunately for Du Pont, the day was clear and the seas calm as glass. The ships of the line, some flanking gunboats and tugs streamed into the Sound on November 7 at 8 in the morning.⁴⁰

Fort Walker on Hilton Head Island and Fort Beauregard on the Bay Point portion of Phillips Island belonged to a chain of coastal fortifications erected, with others strengthened, under the supervision of General Robert E. Lee. Walker, the stronger of the two, contained 42 guns, of which 20 faced the water and a garrison of 700 men. This fort was the southern defense of Port Royal. The northern defensive fortification, Beauregard, had 19 guns, 13 facing the water, and about the same amount of men.⁴¹

The first shots of battle came from the Confederate Navy's "Mosquito Squadron" of five ships, each with at least 2 guns, only to be run off by the Union gunboats. As the *Wabash*, along with the trail of ships following, sailed between the Confederate forts, either at 9:25 or 9:26 am, one of Beauregard's guns, a Dahlgren, fired, only to have the shell explode inside the casing, killing the crew. The gun crew next to them successfully fired the first shot of the coastal defense force. As Du Pont's battle line began its turn towards Fort Walker, his ships were able to devastate each fort with enfilading fire simultaneously. A soldier from the Third New Hampshire, watching from one of the transport ships, recalled the attack led by Du Pont as the "stately *Wabash* led the line, first up to Fort Beauregard, on the right... a broadside was sent in,

⁴⁰ Coker, *Port Royal*, 48-86, McPherson, *War on the Waters*, 39.

⁴¹ Coker, *Port Royal*, 67-72; Daniel J. Crooks, Jr., *Lee in the LowCountry: Defending Charleston & Savannah, 1861-1862* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2010), 39-52; Rick Simmons, *Defending South Carolina's Coast: The Civil War from Georgetown to Little River* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2009).

with Du Pont's compliments. When in turn delivered its shot and shell, making the sand fly." And "[a]fter thus saluting Beauregard, the old *Wabash* gracefully turned left and swept around to Fort Walker" which "received the same treatment as its sister across the bay."⁴² However, before the second run through this elliptical track, coordination broke down and most of the ships took on their own firing positions, making themselves better targets since they stopped moving. An advantage to this breakdown was that the stronger fort, Walker, would have to sustain more concentrated and destructive fire. Even as this breakdown occurred, Du Pont madly signaled to keep formation in order, and his vessel kept circling two more times with what ships that stayed with him and they continued the fire on both forts.⁴³

For four and half hours the battle raged. Sixty miles to the north, citizens of Charleston heard the cannons and wondered if another victory would come. The cannon fire was also heard in Fernandina, Florida, over 70 miles away. As these four and half hours went on, many of the ships being moving targets, remained relatively unscathed, with shots having punched a few holes or tearing sails down with a small number of casualties. On the other hand, these forts gradually lost over half of their water facing cannon and a higher number of casualties. As the fortifications were pummeled, parts of these structures caved in and had large holes punched into their walls. General Thomas Drayton, in command of Fort Walker, recalled that, "[i]n spite of our fire, directed with deliberation and coolness, the fleet soon passed both batteries apparently unharmed, and the returning fire delivered in their changing rounds a terrific shower of shot and

⁴² D. Eldredge, 3rd NH Volunteer Infantry, *The Third New Hampshire and All About It* (Boston: E.B. Stillings and Co., 1893), 60-62.

⁴³ Coker, *Port Royal*, 85-101, McPherson, *War on the Waters*, 38-41.

shell in [our] flank and front.”⁴⁴ Fort Walker fell first around 1:15pm after it was discovered there were only 3 serviceable guns left and a retreat was ordered. Fort Beauregard fell about 1:30pm only when they learned Walker had been abandoned and that garrison fled as well. Beauregard had not sustained that much damage. Overall the Confederacy suffered 11 killed, 48 wounded, 3 captured and 4 missing (66 total). The Union Navy was about half that, with 8 killed and 23 wounded (31 total). The navy did not realize at first that the forts were abandoned until it was observed that the forts were quiet. With the firing stopped, over 200 Marines were sent to occupy the forts and drive off stragglers and clear Hilton Head Island and Phillips Island, the latter occupation focused on Bay Point. The celebration was infectious to all in the fleet. The citizens of Beaufort (on Port Royal Island) and other communities within the Sea Islands made their own retreat towards the mainland.⁴⁵

For some reason it would not be until the next month that the island of Port Royal and the major town of Beaufort would be occupied by Federal forces. It would take longer to occupy the rest of the Sea Islands, with the only real resistance being a minor battle at Port Royal Ferry on the northern tip of Port Royal Island on January 1, 1862. The last island to be secured by Federal forces in February 11, 1862, was Edisto Island. Historians of the battle give few conflicting reasons why this happened: either it is still unclear today why it took so long, or with the scattering and loss of some of the transport and supply ships, occupation would not be prudent until they could be replaced. Or, it was worried that there were other defenses and “Mosquito Fleet” ships unaccounted for that needed to be taken care of first. Whichever one being the

⁴⁴ Report of Brig. Gen. Thomas F. Drayton, C.S. Army, of the bombardment of Forts Walker and Beauregard to the Headquarters of Provincial Forces, Third Military District, Department of South Carolina, Camp Lee, Hardeeville, November 24, 1861. *The War of the Rebellion*, Ser. 1, vol. 6, 6-13.

⁴⁵ Coker, *Port Royal*, 101-105; John Keegan, *The American Civil War: A Military History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 136-37.

reason, it still took over a month, and that allowed all the residents and the Confederate forces to flee. Furthermore, the slow occupation took away valuable time needed to then attack either Charleston, Savannah (though they did occupy Tybee Island⁴⁶ across from Fort Pulaski in the end of November) or both, in order to keep the momentum going, as was originally planned.⁴⁷

Despite this failure to maintain momentum and even to take Charleston early in the war, the Union War Department created a new department for the Army: the Department of the South. As this Department was being organized, General William T. Sherman temporarily commanded the area under Union occupation. He would hold this post under the arrival of Major General David Hunter in April 1862 as the Department's first commander.⁴⁸ This department would contain the states of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

Forming An Experiment

During the month of securing the Sea Islands, four things became quickly evident: there were no secessionist civilians remaining (besides one unfortunate drunk), the towns and plantations were intact (largely furnished and ready for use), cotton was in abundance and ready for harvesting (if not in some areas already in the process of being harvested), and finally, there were about 10,000 slaves abandoned by their masters. Many of them wandering around or awaiting their liberation by the Federal forces. The Navy-Army leadership easily dealt with the first two by being relieved of a civilian populace that needed to be monitored and all the structures were to be used for various purposes, such as quartering soldiers and establishing that

⁴⁶ Tybee is one of a handful of islands that make up the Georgia Sea Islands, just south of the South Carolina ones.

⁴⁷ Ginnie Kozak, *Eve of Emancipation: The Union Occupation of Beaufort and the Sea Islands* (Beaufort, SC: Portsmouth House Press, 1996), 39-40; Coker, *Port Royal*, 115-118; McPherson, *War on the Waters*, 42-43.

⁴⁸ Hunter's arrival will be discussed in more length in Chapter Two.

much needed southern base. However, what were they to do about the cotton and 10,000 slaves?⁴⁹

Officers in Port Royal in remembering what had occurred from their launching point, Fortress Monroe, sought to apply what occurred there to the Sea Islands. In May 1861, three runaway slaves came to Union lines at Fortress Monroe, asking to see the commander, General Ben Butler. Agreeing to see them, the slaves asked to be kept by Butler and put to work, just as long as they would not be taken back to their master. Upon further interviews, Butler (along with an aide, Private Edward Pierce, an attorney)⁵⁰ learned that the local Confederate officer was using his own slaves, and those belonging to others, to construct siege lines around Monroe. Having learned that these slaves had been used as war labor, they were thus tools of war waged against the Union. To further cement the course Butler would take, this Confederate officer demanded his slaves be returned to him. Butler decided to wire the Lincoln Administration about his decision to label all slaves used by the Confederacy as “contrabands of war,” and that any and all slaves that came to Monroe would be kept in the fort and used as a labor force to free up his soldiers for guard duty and any possible future skirmishes and battles.⁵¹

Edward Pierce, this attorney-turned-Army Private-turned consultant, was in Fortress Monroe not simply to be on garrison duty, but also to report to Massachusetts Governor, John Andrew, on the conditions of the state’s regiments in the area. When the three runaways requested the presence of Butler, the latter sought the help of Pierce, knowing his profession in

⁴⁹ Coker, *Port Royal*, 124-125; Kozak, *Eve of Emancipation*, 35-40; Kevin Dougherty, *The Port Royal Experiment: A Case Study in Development* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2014), 17, 21-23; Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Oxford Press, 1965), 14-17.

⁵⁰ Edward Pierce will appear throughout the thesis as an important supporting role.

⁵¹ Dougherty, *Port Royal Experiment*, 17, 21-23; Rose, *Rehearsal*, 13-17; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1988), 51-52.

law before war broke out. In his November essay about the “Contrabands at Fortress Monroe” to the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine, Pierce explained that since Virginia, and the Confederacy as a whole, had declared themselves a foreign power and used slaves (or property as the South saw it) to wage war on the Union, international law on confiscated property entitled the Union to take this “property” from the belligerent foreign power and hold onto it themselves. Politically for the North, Pierce noted that many who abhorred slavery were, however, not ready to declare the slave as both free and as a human, but was more inclined to accept the enslaved as property to fight war for the Union as acceptable. With this caveat, it was decided to call the slaves that were either captured or had runaway to Union lines as “contrabands”. Further, with Virginia as a foreign power, the Fugitive Slave Act, that made Northern states return all runaways, applied no more to Virginia since it left the nation and the Federal Constitution. And to ensure that the Union did not break from international law or outrage the hesitant Northerner or the Border States, all contrabands were made into masons, cooks, carpenters, and other forms of employment and labeled “contrabands,” nothing more.⁵²

Pierce observed that an “invisible telegram” went forth to spread the news of Butler’s decision and how in Monroe a slave could be not so much a slave anymore, but still free from their master. In a short period of time over a hundred slaves came to Monroe. Pierce and Butler messaged Washington to urge Congress to make a law, or laws, to help deal with this ever-growing population of contrabands. Other local Union officers and reports from other front lines proved that there was confusion, and some racism, which resulted in many runaways, even freemen, being sent to Confederate lines. In July, a bill went to Congress and was passed in August. This bill was the First Confiscation Act, which declared that all slaves found in use

⁵² Edward Pierce’s Essay to the *Atlantic Monthly* published in Boston, November 1861.

against the Federal government were to be henceforth “contrabands,” thus supporting Butler’s, and Pierce’s, decisions back in May.⁵³

However, Pierce, an abolitionist and friend of Treasury Secretary, Salmon P. Chase, was skeptical of the act. Since it only pertained to those slaves found to labor against the Union, not just any slave. The Act still placed the slave in a “property” status and did not free them. However, Pierce hoped that this was the beginning of the end of slavery. By the time his essay was published, well over a thousand contrabands called Monroe home. Butler pressed Congress and the War Department to go further into helping these runaways. Butler went as far, according to Pierce, to write that the runaway should go from being “contraband” to “free-manumitted”. In other words, have the men at least be freed from an enslaved condition after being wartime property for a temporary period of time. Pierce praised Butler for this declaration. After the First Confiscation Act, Pierce was made Superintendent of Contrabands.⁵⁴

As Superintendent, Pierce wrote that he was in charge of overseeing that each contraband was instructed, and understood such instructions, before being given whatever job they would be assigned to and that they knew they would for a time be fed just as the soldiers garrisoned in the fortress were fed. Those in the fortress would not treat them as slaves. Pierce described to the reader of the *Atlantic Monthly* that these slaves were intelligent, courteous, hardworking, and religious. He noted that all desired to be educated, especially to be able to read. His daily interactions with them helped strengthen his abolitionist belief that they were just as human as

⁵³ Ibid.; *U.S., Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamations of the United States of America*, vol. 12 (Boston, 1863), 319. In July of 1862, a Second Confiscation Act was passed. This Act, as pertaining to slaves, proclaimed that all enslaved people liberated by Union forces upon confiscating abandoned Confederate property were to be emancipated. This Act helped form the legal basis Pres. Abraham Lincoln needed to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863.

⁵⁴ Edward Pierce’s Essay to the *Atlantic Monthly* published in Boston, November 1861.

anyone else and could be citizens of the Union. Towards the end, he even fostered the hope that they may also be found by other whites as acceptable to fight for freedom and should be trained to fight alongside white soldiers. That is if the government and military allowed them to. In the end of the essay, Pierce recorded that the contrabands mourned his leaving for Boston, blessed him and the government for helping them escape slavery, and hoped he could help them be finally free. Pierce than advised such actions be taken and that Northern peoples should help feed and clothe the runaways until they were able to stand on their own two feet as farmers and laborers ready for citizenship.⁵⁵

This experience as Superintendent of Contrabands and his observations on the conditions and potential of the enslaved, showed that he was well suited for a role in Port Royal—with the added bonus of being a friend of Treasury Secretary Chase.

This shrewd political move of Butler and Pierce did not really free the enslaved but viewed them as legal tools of war. The Union not only would refrain from returning the runaway, they could not be accused of freeing slaves, which would have caused a rift between unionist Southerners, the Border States,⁵⁶ and the Lincoln Administration. This policy was soon extended to Port Royal. It was decided in around late November and early December 1861 to label the 10,000 abandoned slaves as contrabands. As like Fortress Monroe, the slaves in Port Royal, now contrabands, fell under the auspices of the Treasury Department. However, Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, an anti-slavery activist in the Lincoln cabinet, had further ambitions. While agreeing with the forces in Port Royal, who planned to keep the harvest going so funds from the cotton trade could fund the war effort, Chase wanted to bring abolitionists to the area to educate

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri.

the enslaved, prepare them for citizenship, and prove that this race could become not just free, but wage laborers as well. If successful, this would vindicate not just Republican ideologues but the abolitionists too, whose policies he held dear since before the Republican Party was created in 1854. He wanted emancipation to take place finally in the South.⁵⁷

The ideas of free soil and free labor gained prominence after the Mexican War, starting in 1848, as debates in Congress grappled with new land gained from Mexico. These two ideas were never together as platform issues however, for a few years. From 1848 to 1852, there were two political parties that in their own ways discussed slavery and labor, but they did not gain a lot of traction beyond winning seats in Congress and losing presidential election bids. These two were the Know Nothing and Free Soil parties. The former focused on anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic issues, but fractured when it came to slavery. The latter, as the name implied, focused on stopping the expansion of slavery west, which would ensure economic moral superiority over slavery. A coalition of anti-slavery constituents from the declining Whig party and the Democrat party formed the “Free Soilers”, as they were called, but were not able to do more than win some seats in Congress. It was decided that the Free Soil Party, the almost extinct Whigs and the anti-slavery portion of the Know Nothings would merge into the Republican Party in August of 1854. This new party would stand for “Free Soil, Free Labor and Free Men.”⁵⁸

This Republican platform of “Free Labor” had been politically written and discussed to appeal to white labor in the North. It also sought to give some credence to abolitionists, tried to persuade the South of the faults of slavery, and to not stir up whites in general. This latter constituency feared that this potential new force of labor, Negroes, would both take jobs away

⁵⁷ Dougherty, *Port Royal Experiment*, 20-22; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 50-52; Rose, *Rehearsal*, 13-19.

⁵⁸ Lewis Gould, *Grand Old Party: A History of the Republicans* (New York: Oxford Press, 2003), 3-28.

from them, the whites, and lower wages of the struggling workers. In general, “Free Labor” was to be the antitheses of slavery and promote independent, paid artisans and businessmen. Coupled with “Free Soil” these independent workers would also have land available to them in the West so that farmers, large and small, could expand west and plant in freedom. By promoting free labor, land, and westward expansion, not only would slavery be found as backward and inhumane, but it could be contained and die in the South. However, the Republican Party had to assure the white male voters, and even most laboring immigrants, that in promoting the containment and eventual end of slavery, the close to 4 million slaves, now free, would not come North to take jobs, but would work in the South and in the vast acreages of the West. The party also stressed that their platform was in essence free labor vs. servile labor and to keep white men from being degraded by slavery as it went west or entered the North. In containing and eventually ending slavery, the party showed favor from abolitionists, but knew the majority of the North and Midwest was not ready for the radical plans of abolition. So this compromise to appease workers, who did not approve of slavery, and those working to end slavery, was able to unite both factions—a union that helped Lincoln in his 1860 election. This union that approved of Republican “Free Labor, Free Soil and Free Men” would be put the ultimate test in Port Royal: were these ideals applicable in the South? Would the enslaved prove ready for wage labor and independence? Could slavery be contained, ended, and still allow for westward expansion? Could the end of slavery maintain farming out west and keep whites and immigrants employed? Time and application would tell, for now answers had to wait.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford Press, 1969), 57-61; William Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York: Oxford Press, 1988), 168.

During the interval, the military and Treasury had cotton agents⁶⁰ go and make sure the slaves harvested the cotton, some of the agents themselves harvesting, and shipping to the North. General Sherman wrote a report to the Adjutant-General, General Lorenzo Thomas, that with the occupation of the Sea Islands, the slaves were “disinclined to labor and will evidently not work to our satisfaction without those aids to which they have been accustomed, viz, the driver and the lash.” Also that freedom was “more than their intellects can stand” and questioned if they would ever be ready for such freedom. In another report written the next day, also to the Attorney General, he stated that despite a number of the slaves being willing to work, the rest were slothful, could only be made to work with a lash, and only want to be fed and cared for by the government. This latter would be a burden, according to Sherman, and asked the government to question hard as to whether they want to care for these 10,000 slaves. Through Sherman, it was evident that racism and skepticism would play a role in how the Army would treat the populace during the war’s duration.⁶¹

In order to see if conditions in the Sea Islands and among the slave population was ready for his ambitions, Chase sent to Port Royal his good friend, Edward Pierce. Together they would set forth a plan that was more inclined to their abolitionism.

⁶⁰ Cotton agents were not the same as Special Treasury Agents. The former was made up largely of military men, the latter of civilians. Cotton Agents, as the title implied, focused on everything cotton. As soon as the harvest of 1862 was done, their jobs were done, they would return to their regiments. Treasury Agents worked for the Treasury as well as military and the abolitionists, although most of their work focused on land confiscation, sales of property (not slaves) and worked out back taxes owed by secessionist. Cotton was a part of their work, mainly as superintendents as soon as cotton agents left.

⁶¹ General William Sherman’s Reports Adjutant-General Lorenzo Thomas, December 14-15, 1861, published in Ira Berlin et al., eds., *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South* (New York: Cambridge Press, 1991), 118–19 quotation from, *The War of the Rebellion: a compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate armies*, Ser. 1, vol. 6, 203-205.

Pierce was to report back as soon as possible to Chase and decide whether Chase's goals could take root. Pierce sailed to Port Royal from New York, January 13, 1862. However, as Pierce was headed to Port Royal, two other men came to Chase with ideas for the cotton and the contrabands. The first was Lieutenant Colonel William Reynolds of the First Rhode Island Artillery. Not only was he already in Port Royal, but Chase, as recommended by Rhode Island Governor William Sprague, had also placed Reynolds in charge of the cotton, given he was familiar with the trade. Reynolds plan called for private industry to be in charge of the cotton, harvested cotton was to be ginned in the North to bring more people into employment, fund the war through cotton profit, and then to care for the black population in the Sea Islands through charity as they continued to work in the plantations. The second man was Frederick Law Olmsted, reporter and abolitionist from New York. He, with the help from a friend in the US Congress, Senator Lafayette Foster of Connecticut, set forth a bill that would place the cotton and the black populace under the War Department. The department would create a three-man board to deal with the confiscated property, which would be used to take back taxes owed by the rebellious owners and establish guardianship for the contrabands. This latter goal would not just help physically protect the contrabands; it would also help train them for citizenship—the ultimate goal of Olmsted's.⁶²

Pierce would formulate his plan after he had spent two weeks in the region, tried interviewing the contrabands, and sparred with Reynolds. They could not agree on the issue of charity, which Pierce claimed would make the people lazy and ruin the cotton harvest. With the idea to gin cotton in the North, Pierce wanted the cotton to be ginned where it was harvested to keep the people of the islands busy while utilizing their expertise in the work. It also did not help

⁶² Dougherty, *Port Royal Experiment*, 22-25; Rose, *Rehearsal*, 13-17.

that there was confusion via Chase as to how much power each man had in Port Royal. It was decided by Chase that Pierce would “outrank” Reynolds and assigned him to work with the War Department representatives in Port Royal. In working with the War Department, the military would be in charge of protecting the population and making sure both property and cotton was harvested, while Pierce and the Treasury would figure out how to keep the cotton production going using the labor at hand. With some of these issues dealt with, to a point, Pierce set forth his plan: Superintendents would be placed in charge over the plantations while using “paternal discipline,” teach the slave to be self-sufficient, give charity only to help them become independent farmers, and lastly, to bring down missionaries and teachers. Their work would center on religious, civic, and sanitary education of the contrabands.⁶³ Even though they needed “paternal discipline,” it was noted that the Sea Island slaves had some form of autonomy already before the war. They could both labor in the fields and have time for subsistence farming and, according to Pierce, were intelligent and hardworking people who destined and ready for freedom. While this plan helped ensure the harvest would continue, kept the people active, and were to be educated, the overall purpose was akin to Olmsted’s: emancipation.⁶⁴

It can be seen that all three plans and their designers battled for approval, did not see eye-to-eye, resented each other, distrusted each other, and offer a foreshadow of the disunity among all players involved that would almost derail what would take place in Port Royal. Yet Chase had

⁶³ These educators’ salaries would be issued by private organizations, not the government.

⁶⁴ Dougherty, *Port Royal Experiment*, 24-38; Rose, *Rehearsal*, 19-31; Edward Pierce’s Report to Chase, February 3, 1862, in Frank Moore and Edward Everett, eds., *Rebellion Record: A Dairy of American Events*, Supplement, I, (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1862), 302-314; Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction; From Slave to Wage Labor in South Carolina, 1861-1877* (New York: Cambridge Press, 1994), 1-11; Akiko Ochiai, *Harvesting Freedom: African American Agrarianism in Civil War South Carolina* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 25-36; Laura Roper, “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Port Royal Experiment,” *Journal of Southern History* 31, no. 3 (August 1965), 272-284. Roper seems to lament that Olmsted’s bill was made inactive in Congress so that Olmsted could take part in Pierce’s plan (which he later decided not to) and state that “what might have happened had Olmsted’s policy been approved is one of history’s undisclosed alternatives.”

to pick one. While interested in Olmstead's plan, Chase chose Pierce's, for he felt this plan was humane, logical, and offered a better chance for emancipation. However, there was one other part of Pierce's plan that was not really ignored, but everyone was unsure as to whether it was realistic: Pierce argued that the Sea Island contrabands were ready and willing to fight for their freedom and efforts should commence for the arming and training of black regiments. This idea of Pierce's would cause great trouble for the area in just a couple of months after Pierce's plan was approved.⁶⁵

The Experiment Begins

Despite three conflicting plans, three disputing men, and the future of the enslaved, cotton and the war all hanging in the balance, Chase's approval of Pierce's plan would inaugurate the Port Royal Experiment. Pierce, who seemed to be confident in his plan, had already contacted his friend, Reverend Mansfield French of New York (also in Port Royal while Pierce was there), about organizing a Missionary and Educational Society where teachers, missionaries and abolitionists could be organized from New York and Boston and sent to Port Royal and paid by these societies. Together they would initiate Pierce's goal of education-to-citizenship for the enslaved. Unbeknownst to Reynolds and the military in general, this organization of Pierce and French's was to offset the military's cotton agents already in Port Royal, agents that both men distrusted—another example of the disunity and resentment to plague the barely conceived Experiment.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Dougherty, *Port Royal Experiment*, 29-38.

⁶⁶Dougherty, *Port Royal Experiment*, 19, 32-42; Rose, *Rehearsal*, 26-44.

Conclusion

The Port Royal Experiment now had a somewhat coherent plan utilizing the contrabands to continue cotton production; to help set them up as independent farmers, and teachers and missionaries about to be organized and sent to the islands. All that remained was for the Treasury to send their representatives. Officially called Special Treasury Agents, these men were to: help in the confiscation, calculation and sale of rebel property, oversee plantations supervised by Superintendents, prepare cotton for transportation north, and to work with the War Department and the abolitionists. This meant to that these Agents must also follow the orders and requests of these three organizations (another foreshadow of disunity and weakness in the Experiment). One of these newly minted Special Treasury Agents headed to Port Royal was James S. Severance of Boston, Massachusetts. It is his papers that will provide the missing link in the bottom-up analysis of the Port Royal Experiment.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LIFE OF SPECIAL TREASURY AGENT JAMES SEVERANCE BEFORE HE ARRIVED AT THE SOUTH CAROLINA SEA ISLANDS

Introduction

Union military officials quickly discovered that not only would they have to deal with abandoned property and cotton that fell under their occupation of the Sea Islands, but also over 10,000 slaves that were now under their care. Concerned over what exactly they should be doing with these abandoned slaves, the military under Thomas W. Sherman set out to feed and cloth them, but needed advice from superiors in Washington, D.C. Since these slaves were now “contrabands,” that is confiscated property in time of war, under the August 1861 First Confiscation Acts that declared all slaves found by the military used against the Union forces were to be confiscated. Now contrabands, they fell under the care of the U.S. Treasury Department. Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury, sent his friend, former attorney and soldier, Edward L. Pierce to the Sea Islands to report as to what should be done with 10,000 contrabands. In his report, Pierce believed the contrabands were ready and the time was right to prepare the contrabands for wage labor and citizenship. He called for abolitionists and educators to come to the Sea Islands from private charity groups and for the Treasury Department to send Agents to deal with the cotton crop, and cotton trade, and confiscated lands; the latter in hopes that the it would be placed in contrabands’ hands.

One of these Special Treasury Agents was James Severance of Boston, Massachusetts. A Harvard Freshman at the time war broke out; his child rearing by activist parents prepared him for the Port Royal Experiment. This son of outspoken abolitionists, women’s rights advocates, and temperance workers, was molded in such a way that he would bring this upbringing and utilize it while working for the Treasury in the Sea Islands. This upbringing would also play a

major role in how he viewed the implementation and potential success of the Port Royal Experiment.

Biography Of James Severance

James Seymour Severance was born on July 4, 1842, in Cleveland, Ohio, to parents Theodoric (known mostly as “Theo” or “T.C.”) and Caroline. He was the second child born to the couple, but would be their oldest surviving child since their firstborn, Orson, died in 1841. Orson was only a few months old and sickly. Unfortunately his illness was misdiagnosed by a local doctor and died as a result. James’s health at birth was also in doubt, for he was also born sickly, yet he managed to survive and grow stronger. James, always referred to by his middle name, Seymour,⁶⁷ was one of four Severance children to survive into adulthood. His siblings were: Mark⁶⁸ (also referred to by his middle name-Sibley), Julia and Peter (but was called “Pierre”, for Caroline believed the French pronunciation gave more sophistication to the child).⁶⁹

There is not a lot of information that survived from before 1861 that today would permit us to write a comprehensive biography on James. Any information on his life before the start of the Civil War does come from a biography about his mother published in 2010. It is through Virginia Elwood-Akers work, *Caroline Severance* that we are indebted to for any information.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ All though this ‘nickname’ appears in all letters and documents in the Severance papers, for the purpose of this thesis he will be referred to James or simply, Severance.

⁶⁸ In 1864, Mark also became a Special Treasury Agent and his assignment was in Savannah, GA, shortly after General William Tecumseh Sherman captured the city. He would also do some work in St. Augustine and Fernandina, FL and return home in 1866.

⁶⁹ Virginia Elwood-Akers, *Caroline Severance* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse Press, 2010), 23-24, 26-27, 31.

⁷⁰ It is after 1865 that more on the life of James Severance has been preserved, so we know more about his adulthood rather than his childhood.

Despite this handicap, the best way to be able to understand James Severance as both a Special Treasury Agent and as an individual is to look towards his parents, especially his mother. His parents' interests in both political and social issues and his father's employment provides the context needed to make sense of James's observations, irritation and worries while he was assigned in Port Royal.

Caroline Severance, maiden name Seymour, was born in Canandaigua, New York, January 12, 1820. Her father, Orson, was a banker and her mother, also Caroline, suffered from depression. The Seymour family was Episcopalian for most of young Caroline's childhood, before her father died from typhoid in 1824. After needing to move in with family, the Seymour's became Presbyterian, like the relatives that gave them shelter. Young Caroline suffered from shyness, stomach pains, and insomnia. Staying up late every night, she took to reading anything she could. From a young age she became interested in politics. The relatives with whom she lived with were abolitionists and members of the temperance movement. Even though an Uncle James ridiculed her for her interests in politics, she joined the family in discussions on these two issues. A student of various female seminaries, Caroline became well educated, yet still suffered from shyness and had few friends and no ambition for public speaking. However, upon marrying Theodoric Severance (b. 1814), August 28, 1840, she was strengthened by the fact that her new groom and his family also were heavily involved in abolition and temperance, and had welcomed her gladly. However, it was learning that they were also involved in women's rights that Caroline took heart and overcame her shyness and wanted to be as active as her in-laws.⁷¹

⁷¹ Elwood-Akers, *Caroline Severance*, 4-23.

Even though the culture of the 1840's expected Caroline to be a homemaker, she did what she could to be involved politically, finding more success with abolitionism since this -ism was keener to allow women participation and speaking. Abolition's allowing of women speakers and other forms of public participation was radical for the age. Women were seen as the emotional factor in the debate over slavery. Women could appeal to the hearts of men and women in showing how degrading this "peculiar institution" was for women and children. They also showed how it split up families and spread the word that slavery's ills could come north. Seeing the issue of slavery as an issue of equality as well brought forth the radical notion to let women speak and lecture to audiences, proving that abolition was equal in race and gender. Caroline's radical nature as a child to read politics and debate with family matured with abolitionism, in that she gained experience for future roles and issues she would take to heart. However, with the temperance movement, she was involved with the public vicariously through her husband, but nonetheless active in church functions that were not as public.⁷²

While living in Cleveland, where Theo had a job with an insurance company and then a local bank, Caroline slowly became more public by giving speeches, lectures, and holding various offices such as secretary and president for a number of state and local organizations. These organizations were for abolitionism, temperance, suffrage, and a personal crusade: advancing the cause of medical education for aspiring female doctors. This proactivity however, caused her to leave home often. Though she did not want to be like her depressed mother who often neglected the children, Caroline loved her children and had maids and tutors hired, but still wanted to go out and advance her causes. She did not want to be stuck at home. Her husband and

⁷² A great work that discusses the work of women in abolition and the radical nature this work engaged in by employing women speakers by looking at over 200 abolitionist societies and women involved is Beth Salerno's *Sister Societies: Women's Antislavery Organizations in Antebellum America* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

in-laws supported her efforts. From 1840 to 1854, Caroline and Theodoric rubbed shoulders with and befriended many prominent figures in American History such as: Unitarian minister and die-hard abolitionist Theodore Parker, Lucretia Mott, William Lloyd Garrison, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the Grimke Sisters, Bronson Alcott (father of author Louisa May), Salmon P. Chase, Susan B. Anthony and Wendell Phillips. Many of these individuals hailed from Boston, which for Caroline was the center of culture and education. This and the fact Theodoric lost his job at the bank, caused the Severance family to leave their home in Cleveland and head to Boston in 1855—with the advantage of working for larger and more successful movements.⁷³

The bank Theodoric worked for in Cleveland went under after cash mysteriously disappeared. Scandal and rumor spread, and even though no evidence linked Theodoric to the missing money, the rumors still made some damage to the Severance name. So, it may also appear that Boston was a way to make a clean slate for the family. In Boston, Theodoric found a job at another bank.⁷⁴ No matter the reason, Caroline was ready to go.

In New York, Caroline held more of the same offices, but spoke more often at meetings. Not many of Caroline's speeches, or at least copies of them, remain today. Though we do know what she thought, for her private musing and some fragments of a few speeches are found in her letters and journals prior to the Civil War.⁷⁵ There are, pieces of some of her speeches dealing with the women's suffrage-anti-slavery cooperation. One such speech given at the Women's Rights Meeting held at Mercantile Hall, Boston, May 27, 1859 contained such words as, "It bears the same relation to all the charities of the day which strive nobly, in their way, to serve

⁷³ Elwood-Akers, *Caroline Severance*, 23-53.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 51-53.

⁷⁵ Most of Caroline Severance's letters and other writings can be found in the Huntington Public Library, Huntington Beach, CA. The Caroline Severance Collection.

woman, that the radical anti-slavery bears to all superficial palliations of slavery. Like that movement, it goes beneath *effects* and seeks to remove *causes*.” And, “Recognizing women as an equal human being with man before God and the State, it claims for her equality of freedom and of right as an individual...will therefore be worthy to find the noblest love and home...” At the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention held in Ravenna, Ohio, May 25, 1853, in the local Universalist Church, she said, “What woman may become, she does not know herself, since no opportunities have been given her to test the power of mind and body.”⁷⁶

She would see many of the movements centered on suffrage rise and fall. Internal strife such as constitutional resolutions, what speakers said or did not say at conferences, rivalries and, frustration over state and especially the Federal government’s lack of interest were most of the reasons. Despite roadblocks, Caroline was very active and tried to keep the movement rolling, even as suffrage began to work hand-in-hand with abolitionism. This hand-in-hand work was evident during the 1856 Presidential election where the newest political party, the Republicans, took center stage when it came to abolition and labor. During all this activity, James went to at least one meeting with his mother as a participant, but more often when all the children were able to attend, James and his siblings with their father watched their mother speak. In the home and outside, James was obviously exposed to his mother’s ideals and principles and they became a part of him.⁷⁷ As for the influence from James’s parents and the society he grew up in, it is plain that he too would be liberal like them, in terms of abolishing slavery, end the sales of liquor and,

⁷⁶ Elwood-Akers, *Caroline Severance*, 41 and Appendix B, 278.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 53-64. For more on the Republican Party’s early days see, Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford Press, 1969). When Caroline Severance died in Los Angeles in 1914 she was heralded as the “Mother of Clubs”, one of the builders of Los Angeles and was instrumental in helping the women of California be able to vote. She was supposedly the first female in California to both register to vote and vote in the election of 1912, where she said she voted for Progressive Party candidate, Teddy Roosevelt. More on this event and its relation to her son, James Severance is found in the conclusion of this thesis.

the advancement of women through voting, hygiene and education. Additionally, his father's career in banking and insurance also give a further clue into his role with the Treasury and the not the military when war broke out.

As for James Severance's childhood, Caroline rarely wrote about her children. What we do have comes from Marie Zakrzewska (Zak-shef-ska), a young Prussian immigrant to the United States seeking an opportunity to be educated in medicine to be a doctor. The cause of women's medical education became a personal crusade of Caroline's soon after she met and took Marie under her wing. Caroline helped her gain entrance into the schools she needed, where Marie would later become the pioneering female doctor in America. Caroline saw medical education as a great advancement for women and their intelligence for society, and in knowing women struggling to be given a chance to be doctors, Caroline went out of her way and took extra efforts to help them. While boarding with the Severance's in Cleveland, Marie recounted in her autobiography that the Severance children were, "boisterous and impolite" and would make fun of her accent. Yet, she enjoyed their curiosity and energy and enjoyed being with the Severances.⁷⁸

As for any type of physical description, we are to look at one of the works by Louisa May Alcott. As stated above, Caroline's activism brought her to Bronson Alcott, Louisa's father, and a friendship with family was formed. In 1860, the Severances were preparing 18-year-old James for Harvard. To do so, they enrolled him, along with Mark and Peter, to the newly organized coed school run by Diocletian (Dio) Lewis. Dio, a member of the temperance movement, an advocate of physical culture, and the inventor of the beanbag, theorized that education attached with diet and gymnastics would make young men and women into fit, daring, and highly

⁷⁸ Elwood-Akers, 49-51, 53, 58. Quoting from Marie Zakrzewska, *A Woman's Quest: The Life of Marie Zakrzewska, M.D.* (New York: D. Appleton Publishers, 1924).

intelligent adults. While attending the school, James boarded with the Alcott's and was a close friend to Louisa May, who may have been attracted to him, though she would amuse herself at his expense over his feelings for another girl. She called him "Boggs" out of affection. In 1864 when she published a set of four stories, *On Picket Duty and Other Tales*, one of the short stories contains a character that seemed to be based off of James. In *The King of Clubs and the Queen of Hearts*, August Bopp is a "fine gymnast... a bashful man" with brown hair, and is part of the craze of fitness and gymnastics, which included the tossing beanbags. This short description, especially concerning the hair, closely matches James as seen in a photo of him, the only known one of him as an adult (aged 31) from the 1874.⁷⁹ The mention of gymnastics and beanbags also hold some weight to this idea since, as stated, James was in her home to attend Dio Lewis's school, so she was well aware of what he could do as per his education.⁸⁰ The Lewis school's radical combination of gymnastics and formal education was yet another example of the Severance's, mainly Caroline's, radical mindset and willingness to live these new and unique methods, which they believed, would better society.

⁷⁹ The 1874 photo, taken in Santa Barbara, CA, does cause debate as to whether Alcott was talking about James Severance or not. Most of the hair appears light, blond even, but that may be the affect of a flash or some type of reflection coming from the crown of his head. The back of his hair and moustache are darker, browner in appearance however. There are at least four conclusions that come about based off Alcott's description, the 1874 photo and one from 1855 of the Severance boys (located in the Caroline Severance Collection in Huntington, CA), when James was between 12-13 years old: 1) Severance's hair was indeed brown and therefore matches what Alcott wrote, 2) James Severance was blond, maybe a somewhat darker blond, and Alcott simply used authoritative license and had Bopp with brown hair while in general did indeed still represent James, 3) James's brother, Mark, had undisputedly browner hair, so Alcott may really have based Bopp off of Mark, not James and 4) Elwood-Akers simply assumed Bopp was a creation based off one of the Severance brothers due to Alcott's writings regarding James and Alcott's relationship with the Severance family. Either way the ultimate truth lies; the speculation that Alcott based a character off of James Severance is an intriguing speculation to ponder. Yet, in the end, the author of this thesis, after studying the photographs with Alcott's description, concludes that August Bopp is James Severance. The 1874 photo is in possession of this thesis author's father, while the author has a copy of it.

⁸⁰ Elwood-Akers, *Caroline Severance*, 63-64; Louisa May Alcott *On Picket Duty and Other Tales* (reprinted by Garrett Press of New Orleans 1969), 33. For more on Diocletian Lewis and his school see Mary F. Eastman and Helen Cecelia Clarke Lewis, *The Biography of Dio Lewis* (New York: Fowler & Wells Co., 1891).

Taken together, James Severance was not just influenced, but nurtured in liberal ideas. Parents involved with suffrage, temperance and abolition made James a progressive young man that would play out in his adulthood when he helped push for equality in voting in California and supported Teddy Roosevelt's Progressive Party. Being introduced to and living radical forms of education, trying out new methods and experiments meant to better societal living, all explain why he was eager to see Port Royal as an abolitionist experiment succeed. Although he was to work on confiscation and cotton in Port Royal, his focus centered on how the black populace of the Sea Islands was treated. The fact that he could work in these areas while observing the fate of the Experiment through the treatment of the ex-slaves, show that he was also a responsible and reliable young man.⁸¹

James Severance: Special Treasury Agent

Nothing more is known of James for two more years. From 1860 to 1862, Caroline seemed to be involved only in the early efforts to have a Thirteenth Amendment. This effort sought to expand the aims of the war effort to end slavery and make this future amendment associated with suffrage. In the beginning of 1862, James, 19 years old at this time, entered Harvard. The news of the victory at Port Royal in November 7, 1861 would not affect James until February 1862, when recruitment began in Concord, Massachusetts (where the Severance home was located) for the Port Royal Relief Committee.⁸² Theodoric had just gone to his friend,

⁸¹ Elwood-Akers, *Caroline Severance*, 263, 268

⁸² It is interesting that Severance would go to an abolitionist organization for passage to Port Royal when he was to be with the Treasury, not this committee. What can be concluded is that since this committee was leaving soon, James wanted to be in Port Royal, sooner the better. There is no indication that he was a part of the committee itself or that the Treasury was helping him make the trip. It seems that going with the committee made things easier, maybe cheaper, for James. Another point of interest in this part of James's story, is that the committee went to help the enslaved be advanced and nourished as human beings through education, religion and other methods and not solely through one method alone or to use the Negroes in Port Royal as propaganda as other organizations to come to Port Royal would so. This more humanitarian committee is very closely linked to the beliefs of the Severance, as

Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, to obtain a position of Collector of Customs for the Treasury Agents heading to Port Royal. Theodoric also talked to both Chase and the Relief Committee about obtaining a position for James. James even recorded this act of his father's in a diary entry found on February 16, 1862: "Father wrote to Port Royal, about a situation for me." James was about to enter the war effort.⁸³

The first indication that James had indeed obtained at a least an assurance that he was going to Port Royal, with the help of his father, was recorded in his diary. "Father had a letter from C. Fuller at Port Royal." Followed a few days later with, "Steamer in from Port Royal arr[ived] at N[ew] Y[ork] yesterday, so there may be news."⁸⁴ However, he continued to wait and wrote that he "must be brave and live nobly and patiently now." According to his diary, what seemed to get things rolling was a trip to meet a gentleman that appeared to be associated with the Port Royal Relief Committee. After Theodoric told James that "he had some encouragement for [him] from Port Royal Com[mittee]... we decided to go up and see F.B.S."⁸⁵ in Concord, who said "all right." The next day while in Boston, James "received a commission from the

James's writings later on make clear, so going to the committee similar in beliefs may have been a way for James to be with and develop friendships with like minded people.

⁸³ Elwood-Akers, *Caroline Severance*, 65-69. James S. Severance Diary, February 16, 1862, 4.

⁸⁴ Severance Diary, March 12, 17 & 27, 1862, 5-6. Emphasis his.

⁸⁵ From other diary entries "F.B.S." is never given a full name but is also referred to as "Sanborn". It is the conclusion of the author that "F.B.S." was Franklin B. Sanborn (1831-1917). Sanborn was famous for being a member of the "Secret Six", a party of six men that had supplied John Brown for his raid on Harper's Ferry on October 16-18, 1859. What role Sanborn had with the Port Royal Relief Committee or the Experiment is unknown beyond what Severance has recorded in his 1862. It is also not surprising that Severance would not only hear of Sanborn, but also knew him personally given that his parents were very active with the abolition movement. In Elwood-Akers biography on Caroline Severance, she writes that in 1860, Caroline and Theodoric were in attendance at a ceremony commemorating Brown's execution where Wendall Phillips was speaking, only to be attacked and later rescued by police. Maybe Sanborn was there as well. Elwood-Akers *Caroline Severance*, 65. For more on Franklin Sanborn see, Tom Foran Clark, *The Significance of Being Frank: The Life and Times of Franklin Benjamin Sanborn* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Publishers, 2015).

Com[mittee].” This made him the 50th person from Boston to receive such a commission and was told to head to New York for departure in a few days.⁸⁶

The next day, April 8, Severance arrived at New York, went to Custom House. There he, “took oath, and went aboard the *Oriental* at 2. Doesn’t sail till 7 (in the morning) tomorrow.” Before setting sail, a cousin Jimmie came to see him off.⁸⁷ James Severance was now off to be part of the newly established Port Royal Experiment as a recently commissioned Special Treasury Agent. From April 8-13, Severance recorded in a journal he started the day he sailed off the experiences he had onboard. There were severe storms, sick soldiers, the passing by of various vessels, where he was impressed with the armed schooners and naval ships, and then seeing Charleston, SC and Fort Sumter. On the 13th of April, he was awestruck at the hustle and bustle of Port Royal Sound as the *Oriental* entered the Sound. He also recorded his being mesmerized with the weather and the activity on Hilton Head Island and the town of Port Royal as warehouses, docks, and other buildings were constructed. He also noted the reconstructed Forts Walker and Beauregard and how Walker was more imposing to see compared to

⁸⁶ Severance Diary, March 12, April 5-7, 1862, 5,7. Severance does not state what happened to his father after visiting with Sanborn. What has been preserved show Theodoric in Beaufort, SC area the time James arrived, but there are also letters between father and son, where father seems to have been in both New York and Washington, D.C. for a time before coming to Port Royal. Either way, father and son were both in Port Royal around the late Spring-early Summer of 1862 and both stayed until war’s end.

⁸⁷ Severance kept a list of “Our Crew” onboard the *Oriental*. Those prominent today because we have their letters and diaries included: Arthur Sumner (abolitionist and educator), Laura Towne (of Penn School fame) and Mrs. Philbrick (wife of cotton entrepreneur Edward Philbrick). In *Letters and Diary of Laura Towne: Written in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862-1884*, Rupert Sargent Holland, ed., (Salem MA: Higginson Book Company, 1912), 37, Miss Towne recorded on May 4, 1862 that a “Mr. Severance” helped get her from destination to destination in a carriage. It is not known if this was James or Theodoric. Also in Ray Allen Billington, ed., *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1953), 167 in a December 21, 1862 entry, Forten, who came to Port Royal after May 1862, recorded that a “Mr. Severance” came from Beaufort with mail. Billington in his notes states that this was James Severance, but inaccurately states that he was from Concord, NH, when he was from Concord, MA.

Beauregard. Due to the traffic of coastal and sea-faring vessels, the *Oriental* was to wait one day before it could dock and unload its cargo and personnel, which would be on April 14.⁸⁸

On the night of the 13th, after a meeting of sorts for newly arrived soldiers and sailors, Severance and other passengers were given an update from the front lines. The same day that the *Oriental* arrived, so did a military transport vessel, the *General McClellan*, from “Fort Pulaski, with 180 of the 380 prisoners taken at the surrender, which took place Friday [April 11], after one and a half day’s fight...[s]everal boatloads come...one of them brings a shell from Pulaski. Hunter returned in the *McClellan*.” After taking Tybee Island, off Savannah, GA, on November 23, 1861, Union forces began to lay siege on Fort Pulaski, which protected the port to Savannah and the city itself. After 112 days, an attack was launched on April 10, 1862 and lasted into the next day and the fort fell. The fort would be repaired and stay in Federal hands, along with the port of Savannah. The city itself would not fall until Sherman’s “March to the Sea” in December of 1864. Major General David Hunter came to Port Royal after Pulaski was taken to become the Military Governor of the Department of the South. He will play a pretty negative role in the Experiment and for James Severance in the coming weeks.⁸⁹ Later that night, they heard of ships coming from Jacksonville, Florida, carrying both soldiers and refugees, for the city “has been abandoned, unnecessarily...” So upon arriving the Port Royal, Severance was welcomed by both

⁸⁸ Severance Diary, April 8-9, 1862, 8; James S. Severance Journal, April 8-13, 1862, 1-5; Elwood-Akers, *Caroline Severance*, 68-69. Elwood-Akers erroneously states that James left in May. Forts Walker and Beauregard were renamed Welles (after the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles) and Seward (Secretary of State William Seward) respectively shortly after the Battle of Port Royal, yet it appeared Severance was not aware of it when he arrived to the area.

⁸⁹ Severance Journal, April 13, 1862, 6. For more on the capture of Fort Pulaski, see Jacqueline Jones, *Saving Savannah: The City and the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 2008); Herbert M. Schiller, *Sumter is Avenged: The Siege and Reduction of Fort Pulaski* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishers, 1995). A good biography on Maj. Gen. David Hunter is Edward A. Miller’s *Lincoln’s Abolitionist General: The Biography of David Hunter* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997).

advances and reversals in the Federal war effort. A foreshadow at what will occur the next few weeks for the Experiment.⁹⁰

On April 14, Severance and many others onboard were able to find some transportation that could take them from the *Oriental* to the docks at Beaufort, rather than wait until nightfall to disembark. Severance made a note about the town and surroundings that showed some bias. He found that his “impressions are very favorable...as much cleanliness as one would expect—rather neater looking than I had dared hope!” He never said what he was expecting when leaving for Port Royal, but from this impression, it was evident that he was expecting a rundown, dirty, and chaotic southern plantation system. In Beaufort, Severance helped Laura Towne, a Miss Ware and Mrs. Philbrick⁹¹ to their temporary residence. He was invited to go to a planation, now housing for a couple of teachers, on Ladies Island, across from Beaufort and Port Royal Island, to stay until more permanent lodgings could be acquired. Interestingly in Beaufort, Severance noticed that mainly the soldiers garrisoned there had occupied almost all the homes in town, with few civilians representing the various aid and relief committees. Given that all newcomers and

⁹⁰ Severance Journal, April 13, 1862, 6. Jacksonville was one a few ports and cities taken early in the war by the Union to impede the state’s efforts to supply the Confederate government and Army with necessary supplies, which fit in with the “Anaconda Plan”. After the March 24, 1862 battle of Brick Church, outside of Jacksonville, Confederate forces pushed the Union out of Jacksonville and the northeastern Florida region. While retreating, the town of Brick Church was burned down by Union forces, later to board ships for Port Royal. This was the Confederate’s first victory in Florida. For more on this see, United States. 1880. *The War of the Rebellion: a compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate armies, 1861–1865*, Washington, G.P.O., 131-132.

⁹¹ Mrs. Philbrick was the wife of Edward S. Philbrick, abolitionist and businessman from Boston, MA. He is a recurring figure in Port Royal literature for his buying up of over 11 plantations and trying to experiment in different ways to get the freedmen to work and act like wage laborers. All literature show that he was very frustrated at the independence of the freedmen and their wanting to make deals with him to allow for them to spend more time on their own farms. Also in the literature, though he too was an abolitionist and also a friend of many military officials, his land-buying and cotton-growing schemes turned both abolitionists and military off for they saw him as just another Northerner making a profit. Surprisingly, for such a luring and important figure for the Experiment, Mr. Philbrick is rarely mentioned in James Severance’s papers, especially from April to May 1862, the months James saw as the “do or die” days for the Experiment. Only conclusion could be that James worked mainly on Port Royal, Ladies and Hilton Head Islands, whereas Philbrick was on St. Helenas Island and thus never saw each other much during these months. Severance would record more about Philbrick in 1863, which will be discussed in the conclusion of this thesis.

even some of those that arrived before the *Oriental*, were housed in temporary lodgings for a uncertain amount of time is indicative that not only was the military simply controlling the whole area, but that they and the rest of those involved in the Experiment were taking things as they came, with little organization and preparation beforehand.⁹²

As he was ferried to Ladies Island, Severance revealed something that everyone, even those raised in abolition, seemed to have within themselves: racism. However, that just may be how it appears in our day. The contraband that was ferrying him to the island seemed to Severance, “not pretty-looking and impudently-independent of a fellow...” This comment by Severance was one of just a few in all his writings where he appeared to look down on the local ex-slave in terms of intelligence, manners, and craftiness. However, as the next two chapters will show, James Severance thought highly of this race and wanted to best for them, even if it went against the orders of his superiors that he was to carry out among the contrabands of Port Royal. So, was a he a racist, or just a snotty Northern Yankee? Or was he human and judged people by their actions, not race? That depends on who is reading his papers, but, again, the rest of his papers and actions lean toward the third option.⁹³

To help shed more light on the personality of James, and provide supplementary context on his character as we look at the stressful two months during the Experiment, we again go to Louisa May Alcott. In a letter to a friend, Louisa said of James and his departure: “the sending of Seymour [James] Severance, who was a grand person being sensible, kind & interested in the thing.” Here, we see a humble and thoughtful person that went out of concern and sincere interest, not for show, entertainment, profit, or to prove a point. What may be a hidden motive,

⁹² Severance Journal, April 14th, 1862, 6-7.

⁹³ Severance Journal, April 14th, 1862, 7.

but not in any way a serious one to accuse Severance of, dealt with relationships. Severance never mentions his relationships from home in his papers, but Alcott noticed that around the same time “Maggie jilted Boggs [James], he is at Port Royal.” Did a breakup cause him to leave Boston to occupy his mind or was the relationship an obstacle that would have kept him home and away from Port Royal, had not his girlfriend, Maggie, “jilted” him? Or, this was simply gossip for Alcott to pass the time. Either way, from all we see from his writings in the following chapters, Alcott’s words and what little his mother left, James Severance was educated, enmeshed with politics and social issues from a young age, clearheaded, and a kind man. This young man was ready for Port Royal to make a change his mother often lectured on so much, but, as will be seen, Port Royal was not quite ready for James Severance. Regardless, as of April 15, 1862, James Severance was to finally get to work as a Special Treasury Agent for the Port Royal Experiment.⁹⁴

Conclusion

The Port Royal Experiment was indeed ideal for James Severance. Even for his family, in that they would have family participate, via the Treasury Department, in the realization of abolition’s goal to end slavery in America. Although we know little of James Severance himself, the lives of his parents and those they both befriended and worked with are enough for us to understand what kind of young man he was and what he would bring to the Sea Islands. It is truly unique that a young and seemingly fit man as himself would not take the rifle and uniform (more on this in the Conclusion), nor would he join the Experiment as either an abolitionist or educator, but as a Special Treasury Agent. Through this position in the Experiment, his

⁹⁴ Louisa May Alcott to Alfred Whitman June 22, 1862. From *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy and Madeline Stern, eds., (Boston: Little Brown Co., 1987), 79, found in Elwood-Akers, *Caroline Severance*, 68.

abolitionist background nurtured by his parents, would allow him a distinctive form of observation and analysis as to how things were going in the Experiment and how his position, mixed with his background, would come to terms with what did occur.

He would not be disappointed in having to wait long to be able to see the pros and cons of this one-of-a-kind experiment. For, in just a matter of days after his arrival on April 15, his position and ideals would be tested. So too, would he be able to record about the state of the Experiment as one right in the middle of it, discovering he was to serve a handful of conflicting masters. Many masters whose agendas would harm the Experiment, even as far as almost causing it to fail.

CHAPTER THREE

APRIL 1862

Introduction

The Sea Islands of South Carolina were occupied by the Union military beginning November 7, 1861. In deciding what to do with the islands' over 10,000 slaves, Edward L. Pierce arrived to the islands January 1862, on special assignment from Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase. The next month, his report was published and calls were made to send abolitionists, missionaries, educators, Special Treasury Agents, and Tax Commissioners to usher in the Port Royal Experiment. Although the first arrivals to Port Royal were in March, James Severance, the newly minted Special Treasury Agent, would arrive in April. Fairly quickly the Experiment was up and running. Severance, a young college freshman raised by activist parents, went to Port Royal bright-eyed and full of wonder towards his new home. His abolitionist background also gave him a feeling of pride and accomplishment, feeling he was coming south to do good things for a race of people his parents tried helping when living in both Cleveland and Boston. This youthful way of thinking, however, would be given a reality check within a couple of weeks following his arrival. Severance would see all too soon that the lives of the Sea Island ex-slaves were barely progressing, that they were resisting the work being instituted by his fellow Northerners, that fellow agents were lamenting their jobs, and that cotton would be a critical factor, for the worse, in determining the fate the Experiment.

Severance's First Days

From the early stages of occupation of the Sea Islands in November and December 1861, to Edward Pierce's report to Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase in early February 1862 and Severance's arrival to the area mid-April 1862, the cotton harvesting had begun. As plans came

to Chase for the best way to handle the approximately 10,000 contrabands, abandoned property, and cotton, the military (with approval from Chase) appointed cotton agents, mostly from within the ranks, to get the contrabands to harvest the ripe crop. During Pierce's (and Reverend Mansfield French's) time in Port Royal, the agents under Lieutenant Colonel William Reynolds were collecting the cotton and having it shipped north to be ginned, rather than keeping it in the South, as had been the practice before the war. Pierce argued with Reynolds over the ginning issue, since the former desired to keep the practice as is for it would be employment for the contrabands when they become free and wage laborers, while Reynolds wanted the ginning done North to employ people there. Pierce also disagreed with what amounted to unchecked charity, in that Reynolds wanted the black population to be sustained through charity while there was little incentive for them to work after cotton agents had them pick the cotton. Pierce worried that this reliance to live solely off charity would harm the populace by making them lazy, which could later affect the cotton. He feared that a people living off of government welfare (some clothes and some foodstuffs) would see no need to harvest cotton and others would do it instead, thus destroying Pierce's, and other's, dreams of creating a new self-sufficient and educated class of American citizens.

To make matters worse, the cotton agents had an air of hostility and offensiveness about them towards anyone not an agent or the military. They were not hostile in the sense of being verbally or physically intimidating, but they would confiscate the best properties and furniture, most shipped north where a profit could be garnered. The taking of the best of physical property would upset Pierce as he tried to get things ready for his upcoming Treasury Agents and abolitionist-educators. Around mid-March, when those such as Elizabeth Ware Pearson and Edward Philbrick arrived onboard the *Atlantic*, Pierce was getting plantations such as The Oaks

ready for new tenants. Pierce reported that the cotton agents had taken everything that was “movable”, such as beds and chairs. Pierce said that at The Oaks, “[o]ne bedstead was taken, leaving only one for the entire party of ladies and gentleman” and that the agents “had no sympathy with the movement of which I had charge.” As those Edward Pierce was in charge of arrived, such sparse living arrangements undoubtedly discomfited Edward Pierce.⁹⁵

Even though these cotton agents came from the military and thus the two were working in tandem, there were cases that Colonel Reynolds and his agents acted independently from the military, which created a small rift that lingered between the two groups for a couple of months. One such instance centered on housing and furniture. According to General Isaac Ingalls Stevens, his plan to render the local Beaufort Library for specific use for troops was overridden by Reynolds’ agents who took the furniture and books and shipped them north. The agents overrode Ingalls due to Reynolds’ interpretations of orders by Secretary Chase in a broad constructive manner that essentially gave the agents license to do whatever they saw fit in order to declare something as abandoned property for confiscation. Money was then extracted from that property.⁹⁶

Laura Towne, abolitionist and educator, who came to the Sea Islands with Severance on the *Oriental*, shared her view, and that of Reverend French, of cotton agents shortly after her arrival. “They all say that the cotton agents have been a great trouble and promise still to be” and that she was “disgusted” by what the interactions she saw between the black populace and the military and their agents. In short, a “great want of system” was apparent, though she never

⁹⁵ Edward Pierce to William Reynolds, March 18, 1862 in, *Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States. Compiled by Robert B. Matchette et al. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1995.*

⁹⁶ Restricted Commercial Intercourse, United States Archives; *New York Times*, February 24, 1862. This event is found in Rose’s *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 25.

offered any ideas of what sort of “system” she’d like to see unfold.⁹⁷ Severance, as will be seen later on, would offer up some ideas for the “system.”

Although Pierce, Towne, French, and others reported from February to mid-April 1862 about their worries and attitudes towards these cotton agents, new Special Treasury Agent James Severance made no record of any dealings with the cotton agents after his arrival. In fact, it would be a few days before he became immersed in the work of the Experiment. His first job as Special Treasury Agent was not as a superintendent over plantations or auditor of abandoned property, but was with the Commissary. We are not told what his thoughts were as he worked in dealing out and dividing foodstuffs and clothes, handling wages and keeping livestock, but we do know he had a great sense of humor about it as well as a good work ethic. He went right to work and was reliable, as so his words show. Severance noted that fresh beef and bread was scarce, but there was plenty of sugar, pilot bread (hardtack), vinegar, molasses, pork, and few other items. As for pork, there must have been a large supply of the meat for after recording that each person was to obtain 5 ¼ pounds of pork a week he ended with, “Oh! Shades of Ham! What a mess.”⁹⁸ Later on, with joviality and wit, Severance stated that the next big “assignment” in the Commissary was that of mule keeping. With no other place to stable them, Severance and his fellow “commissars” had to clean out ““our apartments””, so that their lodgings could act as a temporary stable for the mules that came from New York. They were “busily occupied all morning in catching and tying them, which was no easy task. Many a funny scene did we enjoy, and it was quite a pleasing excitement”, even though he later exclaimed, “what perverse beings mules be!” That night was spent “guard[ing] our obstinate brethren.” They had little sleep due to

⁹⁷ Rupert Sargent Holland, ed., *Letters and Diary of Laura Towne: Written in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862-1884* (Salem MA: Higginson Book Company, 1912), 6.

⁹⁸ Severance Journal, April 16, 1862, 9.

the mules' "kicking and braying", which had also "eaten up nearly the whole fence." By noon the mules were off to various plantations. Severance must have been only all too glad to be rid of his "obstinate brethren", no matter how much excitement and how many "funny scenes" transpired.⁹⁹

What is interesting is that he placed *our apartments* in quotation marks. Remember in the previous chapter he was invited to stay in an occupied plantation until more permanent accommodations could be procured. By the time he related the tale of the mules, he and a few Agents had moved into a seminary building near Beaufort, which again acted as temporary lodgings. He shared this seminary with some educators and fellow Treasury Agents, but most of the buildings had to be converted into a type of stables. It had been two months since Pierce was sent to Port Royal and given approval for his Experiment. Two months and the military controlled just about everything and raided the rest. Two months and women coming with abolitionists and education groups had housing with sparse furnishings. Two months and those under Pierce had to move from place to place until something more concrete could be arranged. Two months may seem like such a short time span to figure things out, but with the war raging and the rush to help the 10,000 ex-slaves and harvest the cotton, the Experiment was beginning its first moments of creation by running by the seat of its pants. Truly, as Towne phrased it, a "system" of sorts was needed for the Experiment to be of any worth.¹⁰⁰

During his experience with the mules, the war raged close to home for all those in the Experiment. First, reports and rumors arrived concerning the frontlines from ships recently docked at Port Royal Sound. He did not give a name of a battle or details of the actions reported,

⁹⁹ Ibid., April 17-18, 1862, 10-11.

¹⁰⁰ The more permanent lodgings for those like Severance would not occur until the end of 1862, early 1863.

but simply said that supposedly, “Beauregard is dead!” but that, “one can’t believe half he hears, and there is no way of knowing anything until you get it from the Northern papers.” Beauregard, being Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard, and the rumor of his death, came on the heels of the two-day, and costly, victory for the Union at Shiloh in Tennessee, which was fought 10 days earlier (April 6-7).¹⁰¹ Finally, close to home, a steamer came from Savannah, Georgia, “bringing the bodies of 12 brave men of the Michigan 8th Regiment, who were killed during reconnoissance [sic],” from an ambush near Fort Jackson by a reported 800 Georgians that had “surrounded them.” A Confederate prisoner told his interrogators that his men “knew of our movements beforehand, and had prepared to receive us.” Laura Towne recorded the same experience. Being circulated throughout the Sea Islands were “[s]tories of danger...from waggish [mischievous] soldiers, I think.” Although she claimed there was no truth in the stories, she does record that a Michigan regiment had been fighting on Wilmington Island, one of Georgia’s Sea Islands. Fort Jackson was located on the Georgia mainland, next to where the ambush took place. Even though Towne seemed to brush the results of the fighting and the dangers of rebel forces aside, Severance gave off a feeling of seriousness, amplified when it was reported to him that others had seen the bodies and told him it was “an awful site.” The Union may be in control of a stretch of land that went from the outskirts of Savannah to just outside of Charleston, but the Confederacy was still in force near the Union lines and could still threaten the Northerners and the Experiment.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Severance Journal, April 17, 1862, 10. Severance was wise to not trust in this rumor. The Confederate general that was killed was Albert Sidney Johnston, whose death was a major blow to the Confederacy. Beauregard would replace Johnston in Tennessee. However, he does not address this in his journal.

¹⁰² Severance Journal, April 17, 1862, 10. *Laura Towne*, 11. For more on this ambush see, *The Union Army: A History of Military Affairs in the Loyal States, 181-1865* vol. 6 (Madison, WI: Federal Publishing Company, 1908), 922-923. How the Confederate forces knew about the location and movements of the 8th Michigan is not known, nor was it recorded in Severance’s papers. Severance attended a group funeral for some of the men killed that took place the next night.

From Frustration To Resistance Then To Mutiny?

On the 19th of April, Severance finally encountered the affects of the Experiment. As related, Severance at the time lived in a seminary with some Special Treasury Agents. On this day, the 19th of April, two of these agents, selected as superintendents for some plantations, came home from a day of work and unloaded on Severance what they had been going through, with today being more frustrating than previous days. In fact this was not the first time according to Severance, for the superintendents “come in...and have all sorts of stories” yet the two that came in today had a story “as deplorable...as any.” David F. Thorpe and William E. Park had combined total of 13 plantations under their care.¹⁰³ However, both men “[have] a great deal of trouble with them.” The contrabands had been “promised pay and clothing by the government thro’ the Assoc. and they have received none of the former and little of the latter that is serviceable—all their confidence and respect is gone, and they promise everything, and do nothing.” The pay of \$1 an acre worked was negotiated between the cotton agents, acting in lieu of the government, and the National Freemen’s Relief Association a couple of months ago in February.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ It was rare for James Severance to record an individual by their full name. Most often he gave initials, last names only or a Mr./Mrs./Ms. and last name. A rare instance of full name usage is found in the case of the passenger list of the *Oriental* he provides at the end of diary. In researching “Mr. Thorpe” and Mr. Park”, lists from War Department records and from Edward Pierce list a David F. Thorpe and a William E. Park, respectively. It is believed by me that since these are the only Thorpe’s and Park’s that can be found on record, Severance referred to David Thorpe and William Park. Photocopies of these lists as well as letters from those involved in the Experiment can be found at: “List of Superintendents and Teachers Under Brig General Rufus Saxton Military Governor of the Department of the South June 1863,” accessed March 5, 2016, <http://www.drbronsontours.com/bronsonportroyallistofsuperandteachersdeptofsouth.html>; “The Original Gideonites List of the First Teachers who Traveled to Port Royal South Carolina from New York March 2, 1862,” accessed March 5, 2016, <http://www.drbronsontours.com/bronsonoriginalgideoniteslistoffirstteacherswhotraveledtoportroyalmar21862.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Severance Journal, April 19, 1862, 11.

When Thorpe at the end states that, “they promise everything, and do nothing”, he appeared to be referring to the laborers on the plantations, the contrabands. This is the most interesting part of the story, yet subtle. The contrabands working in the fields began to act like the government, after a fashion. The men working the fields for two months had experienced the Federal government, and at least one relief association, promising pay and clothing for work, only to receive really none of the two in the end. In a form of resistance and negotiation that more than likely was practiced during the antebellum years, the contrabands reacted by promising work, only to do nothing in the end. This was to teach the government and the Northerners that two could “play the game” and they would make promises like the government did and like the government, break the promises. This resistance-negotiation was to work like it did with their former masters: the government would have to “pay up” if the work they wanted was to be done. Two months into the Experiment and resistance was forming. Most of those contrabands in the Sea Islands were no longer celebrating their liberation.¹⁰⁵

Back in the beginning of Thorpe and Park’s account, they had 13 plantations under their supervision. That is quite a lot for two men. However, we are not told how many others, if any, worked with them. It is also not clear in records preserved today, if they were alone or not. Supposing they were alone in watching their shares of the 13 plantations, it is sobering to recall that the South Carolina Sea Islands had 200 plantations established within, with other 100,000 acres of land seized by the Union army. Most of the land was used for harvesting. That is a lot of

¹⁰⁵ A perfect example of day-to-day resistance prior to the Civil War by slaves of both genders is found in Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

land to have to supervise, control, and ensure decent harvests in the post-master Sea Islands for these Northern men.¹⁰⁶

If lots of land to oversee and promise-breaking workers were not stressful enough, they also recounted that there were others causing a scene. Termed by them as “disorderly negroes,” the army had to intervene as these “disorderly” men were disrupting the harvesting. However, even the military had little power over the contrabands. They were held for a “ridiculously short period of time,” only to be released for no reason given. The “disorderly negroes” went back to “laughing and thereby inciting the others by idleness and mutiny.” Then an officer stepped in. General Stevens, mentioned above, according to Thorpe, had “sympathy for the movement” to clear the idle, the “mutineers,” and disruptive people, had passed an order “to have the disorderly re-arrested—he also reprimanded the soldiers that let them go.”¹⁰⁷

Mutiny is an interesting choice that Severance recorded as Thorpe’s adjective of the scene. Used in this context, we see another form of resistance. Whereas earlier it was an instance of promise making, then breaking, concerning work in order to negotiate for the pay and clothing promised by the government. Here, those stated to be in mutiny are resisting by simply refusing to follow orders of superintendents like Thorpe and Park, with no negotiations involved.

Things got worse from there, according to Thorpe. Thorpe and others (had others joined in this account to talk to Severance or was Thorpe referring to other superintendents he had talked to, is unclear), disclosed that, “the old system of punishment must be retained—perhaps in a different form, and milder—until their [the black populace] confidence and respect is

¹⁰⁶ These numbers come from Edward Pierce’s letter to Sec. Salmon Chase dated February 3, 1862. Found in Frank Moore, ed., *The Rebellion Record* (New York: Putnam Publishers, 1864), Vol. 1 supplement, 303-308. However, in Rose, *Rehearsal* xii, 115-116, looking at the 1860 Census for South Carolina notes that there were over 33,000 slaves in all the Sea Islands, though only about 10,000 were found in all Union occupied areas.

¹⁰⁷ Severance Journal, April 19, 1862, 11.

regained.” “Old system of punishment?” Would whippings, chains, taking food away, beating and other methods as practiced by slave masters and/or overseers return upon those that thought they were free from all of that? According to these superintendents talking to Severance, some form of that might be returning. It may sound refreshing to some that it would be a milder form, but would the contrabands be refreshed of these milder forms? The very thought that these men involved in an abolitionist-centric experiment would begin in a way to act like those planters and overseers they gladly rebuked and chastised up North for the past 30 years, is despicable for modern readers. All the while, one can only guess what those who may have to inflict the punishments were feeling about the prospect. Had things really changed for the contrabands of the Sea Islands? It would appear not.¹⁰⁸

Bringing the “deplorable story” to end, Severance interjected his thoughts. “We may lament that it was ever lost [the confidence and respect], but that is the fact, and now it must be at any cost, secured, or the whole affair is a failure.” Now, it would appear that Severance agreed to have old punishments return, however, what he wrote soon after gives a sense that he was hoping to avoid that. “If Gov[ernmen]t only could realize the importance of speedily redeeming her promises to these poor people!” and “the more you see about this experiment the more problematical it becomes considering the circumstances attending the management of the whole affair.” Not only did he acknowledge the people’s lowly state, but he also expressed his own torment of broken promises. The government promised freedom, money, and clothes. They have failed in keeping all three. For Severance, if these promises could be redeemed, and quickly, things just might improve for the Experiment and it would be saved. Since he wanted the promises redeemed, one of them being the true sense of freedom and liberty, here it can be stated

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

that he hoped to avoid seeing the “old system” return. Beyond broken promises, Severance’s joviality while in the Commissary now waned. He had, it seemed, lost faith in his bosses in the Treasury and the Experiment itself due to its lack of management, which had caused, according to him and others, the resistance of the contrabands and their lost hopes for the Union. Twice in just a few sentences, he expressed the Experiment would fail if it continued down this path.

Compared to Laura Towne, she noted that Pierce himself said, “we have no system here”, yet he said it, “playfully.” Acknowledging there was really no plan or management, Pierce either was simply fine with that or was confident enough that everything would be all right and did not want her to worry. As for resistance, she also recorded that a couple workers demanded that they be given time away from cotton to farm their small plots. One of them went as far as threatening with a knife, saying that “unprovided with food” the government-owned corn house would be broken into. The knife-wielding individual and his companions were calmed down by Mr. Edward Philbrick and arrested so that they could cool off before returning to work. The knife drawing and threat was an event close to a violent resistance coming from the contrabands, however, Towne called this “a little rebellion” and seemed relieved that the men went back to work after cooling off. She went as far as calling the black populace “docile” and just needed to be positively reinforced like children for, according to her, it was all based on fear—a fear of all white men and not knowing how to deal with it. Towne and Philbrick seem to not be all that concerned with the resistance.¹⁰⁹

For Severance however, if these promises remained broken, feared something worse could happen:

¹⁰⁹ *Laura Towne*, 9.

One thing to me seems certain—if these agents (Treasury Agents) leave and go home this summer, and no pledges are redeemed, the enterprise is a failure. Never again will these people (the freedpeople) have the confidence that they had in us when the army first came. And if they are not treated better before that time (the fall season), it [would] not be surprising to hear of an open mutiny; and it might not be so easy to get away for some (Northerners in the area)!¹¹⁰

Things would escalate! For a third time, he declared that the Experiment would fail; only to get worse if nothing was redeemed *and* the people were not treated better. The latter implied that he was against the idea of the return of the ‘old system.’ What was worse than failure that could happen? Not the type of mutiny mentioned above where one refused to comply with orders. No, here it was “open mutiny”, a rebellion by all of the over 10,000 contrabands that would only be violent. How? Many Northerners in the area would find that it would “not be so easy to get away...” How dreadful. An experiment to free the enslaved, give them wages, and make them American citizens was already, for Severance, at the point, after a couple of months of operation, of failing and ending in violence at any moment. If that happened, how would the war go? News would spread surely. The North would be horrified and embarrassed that they drove these contrabands to rebel, while the Confederacy would prop this up across the continent and the world. Slavery would be declared as the best and only institution viable for the nation, Lincoln and Republicanism discredited, a war won by the Confederacy. An ending that may see two, not one, nation and four million still enslaved. Now, Severance does not go as far as to

¹¹⁰ Severance Journal, April 19, 1862, 11-12.

imagine this dreadful “what if” beyond an open and violent rebellion. Yet, a modern reader would have this speculation and possibly others raging through their minds, upon seeing Severance’s bold theory resulting in the face of mismanagement, broken promises, and a people not treated better; treated as free men. Clearly something, or some things, had to change, and fast.

Conversely, there may be another way to look at this story. Above, the emphasis on “they” has been centered on referring to the contrabands and their application of slave resistance to the Experiment. This other way of looking at this pronoun that is just as plausible is that “they” referred to the Treasury Agents-turned-superintendents themselves. Thorpe and Park may have just as easily been criticizing themselves. Not so much that they were making themselves as “bad guys,” which many early historians of Reconstruction had alluded to (as discussed in the historiography), but that these Agents were placed in a precarious situation. As representatives of the Federal government and working with the Association, they were the ones making the promises of pay and clothing, only to find that the government and Association were not supplying the two things. So, the Agents had inadvertently made themselves as promise breakers. They had as a result, lost confidence and respect for themselves, and possibly the government. They were beating themselves up for a position others had placed them in. This would make sense due to Severance observing that all problems with the Experiment stemmed back to the managerial issues. All problems led back to management, not those like Thorpe, Park, and Severance. And being caught in the middle with government and the freedmen was not a pleasant spot for one to be in.

In the end though, Severance ended this story with his fear that if promises were not kept and if the black populace was not treated better, it would be the contrabands rebelling, not the

Agents, and the Agents would be the victims of the violence. We have black workers noting broken promises made by others; others being idle; others were mocking those working; and a number having to be arrested. The most plausible interpretation of those who make promises and do nothing, those who have lost respect and confidence in others, were the contrabands. They could possibly do more than simply resist a little here and there, if their lots were not improved as promised.¹¹¹

When we look at what Colonel Thomas W. Higginson would say a year later after taking command of a black regiment: “revolutions may go backwards.” The Experiment was indeed a revolution, a revolution of the South, of an enslaved people, and of a nation to free the enslaved. Yet, as an apparent student of history, Higginson knew not all revolutions succeeded, and some went back to square one. However, it is stimulating to note that he said it “may go backwards”, where some optimism shined. If not careful, the Experiment would fail, but could be saved, so one should not be so pessimistic. Yet, Severance had no silver lining, it was simply, and possibly a literal, “do or die” situation. He was pessimistic for the state of the Experiment and the lives of others. In fact he said he was certain of it.¹¹²

¹¹¹ This is a judgment call by the author. To restate, the issue lies with the usage, in fact the reliance, Severance had with the word ‘they.’ Because he was not clear as to who ‘they’ were, any interpretation discussed above can work. Maybe he was referring to the black populace, maybe he was referring to Special Treasury Agents assigned to be plantation superintendents, or he was reinforcing the government and the National Freedmen’s Relief Association’s ability to make great promises but inability to make them realities. Yet, no matter which interpretation is accepted by the reader, each one leads towards the same conclusion: The lack of a functioning management, broken promises and the loss of respect and confidence, according to Severance, will lead to a violent mutiny to end a failing Experiment. What Severance warned goes a bit contrary to what others at the time said. Rose in *Rehearsal*, discusses in great detail in the chapter, “Department of Experiments,” 141-168, the problems that arose from cotton agents, lack of pay, lack of sympathy for blacks by the military, conflicting leadership and so forth. Throughout March to June 1862, there was great worry, however, in letters and journal entries quote from individuals such as Salmon Chase, Laura Towne, Edward Pierce, Harriet Ware and Rufus Saxton, none warn of violence or great failure, but say they either await the coming day of changes, find negative events to be temporary or celebrate that the changes made would bring success. Severance and other Treasury Agents, as seen above, disagreed with the optimism placed by others.

¹¹² Thomas W. Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Cambridge, 1900), 63-64. Higginson hailed from Boston, MA and was a radical abolitionist. He was a member of the “Secret Six” that funded John Brown’s

Trying To Repair Broken Promises

And on that disheartening note, Severance ended his account of Thorpe and Park. As a side note that same day, there was hope that he may soon both have some work outside the Commissary and have more permanent lodgings. He also recorded that the meals situation for him and other Agents, as well as their wage issues, were to be endured until reformed soon, so they “can have some regularity.” However, he does not go any further in explaining what the meal situation was, beyond getting two meals a day. As for pay, he simply hoped for at least, “better fare.” This short comment goes back to the event above where the problems with management (which in modern lingo seemed like it was run “by the seat of their pants, working as they go”) and managerial matters were also having negative effects on the Agents sans working with the contrabands.¹¹³

Just a few days after predicting a coming mutiny, Laura Towne had also experienced broken government promises. She recorded that they (fellow female abolitionists) too had to deal with a short supply of clothing and related this situation to those contrabands they worked with on Coffin’s Point located in Hilton Head Island. However, there was a stark difference. While the problem was the same, the reactions of Towne and the contrabands were not as dreadful. The contrabands said that, “‘Gov’ment is fighting for us and we will work for the Gov’ment,’” and that these people, “express greatest love for the Yankees.” Further, Towne and her companions, “cheerfully,” go and visit the people and claimed that the people, “patiently ‘work for the

efforts in Kansas and Harper’s Ferry, VA. During the Civil War, he was a captain of the 51st Massachusetts before promoted to Colonel to lead the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, one of the first black regiments raised in August of 1862. In fact the 1st South Carolina had its beginnings with Military-Governor Hunter’s recruitment effort in May 1862, which will be discussed further below. For more on Higginson see, Anna Mary Wells, *Dear Preceptor: The Life and Times of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963). Emphasis mine.

¹¹³ Severance Journal, April 19, 1862, 12.

Gov'ment.'” Regardless of this optimism, there was discontent with cotton work. Towne recounted that the, “negroes take it hard that they must work at cotton again this year, especially as it must be to the neglect of their corn,” a crop they needed for next winter.¹¹⁴

The next day, however, she became a bit more worried about the issues of pay and clothing. She agreed with Thorpe and Park in that the clothing to be passed out was of poor quality. She also related that Pierce himself was doubtful that the government should be allowed to pay for the cotton labor, also lamenting the lateness of the promised pay. However, Towne and Pierce, according to the former, found an alternative method to alleviate the wage problem. Pierce and the association Towne represented, the Port Royal Relief Commission, would pay wages out of pocket. They would do so until the government worked out their wage problems. Although they too worried as Severance did about broken promises, they came up with a temporary reprieve that appeared to please both white and black residents in Hilton Head, an action they knew would keep the Experiment running and help the government save face.¹¹⁵

Severance, to his credit, did record this event, for he appeared to take part. He documented that Pierce came to the Eustis House with the, “New York bill”, where Severance gave, with “satisfaction,” \$1.50 that was to, “be paid to the negroes, as partial payment for their cotton planting.” He also heard that, “\$5000 came for this purpose; and it is proposed to pay at the rate of \$1 an acre.” Here Severance was satisfied that something was being done about wages, yet he did note it was a “partial payment,” not something done in full nor paid out by the

¹¹⁴ *Laura Towne*, 16-17.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

government. Despite this temporary change that pleased Severance, wage problems would creep back and will be discussed later on.¹¹⁶

Towne and Pierce were innovative enough to handle the wage problem and knew the government would fix itself. However, this optimism diminished when just a couple of days later, Towne wrote that the people were not content with this temporary measure. This discontentment caused her and other women to go out and calm the people, which she claimed was successful. So, even as this innovation pleased Towne and Pierce, the people later were not pleased.¹¹⁷ As for Severance, deep down he felt that broken promises made to the contrabands was psychologically damaging, unless the one that broke promises healed the damage with quick recovery. This contrast also shows that those that worked closer with the contrabands in the fields were more depressed compared to those that did not go into the cotton fields themselves or were in a position of hierarchy that they did not have to work with the contrabands on a close, day-to-day basis.

Also around the same time as Severance and others felt that their work as Agents were doing more harm than good, broken promises making it all worse, Towne however, was glad to do any work on behalf of the black populace; even if it was simply acting as a housekeeper during her first many weeks in the area. Whether she was simply happy to be working, or naïve

¹¹⁶ Severance Journal, April 28, 1862, 15-16.

¹¹⁷ *Laura Towne*, 25-26. In this same section of her journal, she recorded that a unnamed superintendent went to fellow abolitionist, a Mr. Hooper, to discuss wage regulations for the military members and their wives and that goods from this region are sent North to be sold by private speculation, which profit goes to superintendents. This same superintendent is quoted to have said, “the whole plan is a failure and is sure to break up.” Towne agreed it might break up if more people do not show up to help in what she termed “benevolent plans.” This unnamed individual saying this “plan” (the Experiment possibly) would fail sounded a lot like Severance, for he used the same phraseology, yet no where in his papers did he mention military pay and their wives, speaking with a Mr. Hooper on the 28th of April, or private speculation and profit in superintendents pockets. Could this be Severance still and that he would not acknowledge he may have profited from sales? This is unlikely since he never talked about it or military, as well as Towne knew Severance, as they were passengers on the *Oriental*. This just may be a different superintendent/treasury agent that had the same fears of failure for the Experiment.

in that housekeeping her lodgings was furthering abolition, we do not know. Or there was the possibility that Severance was working to prove himself and disappointed that this work was damaging the abolitionist ideals he was raised in. Or, he himself was naïve when he first arrived and now discovered the reality of this work. We can never really know. Yet, the differing reactions to their individual work does do away with the idea that there was a unity in thought and optimism among all those involved in the Experiment.¹¹⁸

New Sites, Cotton, And Defense

On the 21st of April, Severance did receive some good news. Edward Piece had it shared to Severance by messenger that he, Severance, was to go to the, “Eustis Overseer House,” and there he will make a place to reside and could possibly be working in this plantation, no more to be in the Commissary. He declared that, “I am tired of such an unsettled life as I have had for the last week, and would gladly welcome any change.” One wish of his was granted in full: more permanent lodgings, especially one where mules did not have to be roommates. Another wish partially fulfilled, was to be out of the Commissary, yet he was not told exactly what he would be doing from then on.¹¹⁹

About a week later, Severance had his first look at cotton fields. After attending a church service, Severance and a Mr. Holt¹²⁰ were walking around Hilton Head Island and, “pass thro’ several cotton-fields,” where he noticed that some were from “last years, others planted, with the plants three inches up.” He also observed that a, “field is planted one year, and entirely neglected the next so that much of the country has a folorn [sic] and neglected appearance.” This

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹¹⁹ Severance Journal, April 21, 1862, 13-14. Eustis is Frederick A. Eustis, a Gideonite that was assigned to superintend a plantation on Ladies Island.

¹²⁰ It is not known who exactly who “Mr. Holt” was.

appearance he admitted, “deceived me at first,” for he thought it meant a, “scarcity and unwillingness of the negros was the cause.” Even if this was the case, “in some degree,” he discovered that the appearance was a tried and true practice where, “every year half the land is uncultivated, and runs quite wild with weed and thistles,” with what was left uncultivated had last year produced an “immense cotton crop...the largest for a great while...” Here Severance admitted his naiveté to how cotton was harvested and produced and how the land cultivated and cared for. As for his first reaction, he admitted that it was a result of the claims that came from both South and North that those enslaved were lazy. For the South, the pro-slavery people argued that the African was lazy and therefore slavery was for their benefit to make them a laboring people, even if it meant supervising and whipping them. For the North, they argued that the condition of slavery made them idle and that it was the job of the Northern people to help the enslaved be wage laborers that in turn could be prosperous on their own accord without punishment forcing the labor. The latter argument went well with the Republican platform of “Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men,” discussed in the previous chapter. Although Severance fell for this reasoning of willful idleness of the slaves, he did admit that he was able to learn otherwise and fix that previous erroneous why of thought towards the enslaved.¹²¹ This moment of education and reality will now keep away the naiveté Severance had when he first desired to come to the Sea Islands.

Towards the end of the month of April, Severance was able to see the result of a successful blockade. He received word that the *USS McClellan* came to port with a prize, a blockade-runner, christened *Isobel*, with the help from a smaller craft, the *Santiago de Cuba*. The

¹²¹ Severance Journal, April 27, 1862, 14-15. Akiko Ochiai in, *Harvesting Freedom: African American Agrarianism in Civil War Era South Carolina* (Westport CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), devotes a chapter on the history and practices of cotton work by slaves in the chapter, “Historical Growth of a Black Region,” 17-50. More on cotton work during the Experiment will be analyzed later on.

McClellan also chased another runner, *Nashville*, for six hours but the latter was able to escape. In the *Isobel* were “Enfield rifles and Revolvers, and over a million in specie.” Severance accurately professed that this was, “good news indeed.”¹²²

The next day, Severance was asked to be a substitute teacher for a local school and agreed to do so. He confessed that he, “had his hands full,” for as he tried to instruct them and handout assignments, the children were, “continually interfering with each other, by talking, laughing, fighting, etc.!” He admitted that this involvement with educating children had him, “prefer[ring] the store, even with the bother of sugar and molasses.” He even admitted that he gave them an hour of a half of recess in order to give him a reprieve before continuing his substituting duties. As a sort of assistance to his ease his stress a, “negro woman, smoking a pipe and bearing a huge switch,” used the switch on some of the girls, exclaimed, “Have manners!” and dragged at least one girl out for her behavior. One can get a sense of the comical scene of a pipe smoking woman barging in to correct the children, but to then see the switch being used and a girl dragged out also brings to some, shock and surprise to the whole situation as it unfolded.¹²³

Although he had moved to a more permanent lodging and had been assured something beyond Commissary work to do, as April came to a close, Severance was still doing store work at this planation, passing out rations and dealing with the products within. So as May came, his situation was more or less the same, but this new month, as will be seen, would bring about change, good and bad, and would only reinforce his fears of a mutiny if the government, the military, and the Experiment in general did not change its modus operandi. They really needed to help and improve the lives of the over 10,000 contrabands.

¹²² Severance Journal, April 29, 1862, 16-17.

¹²³ Severance Journal, April 30, 1862, 17.

Conclusion

The Experiment officially began in February after Pierce's report to Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase and by the end of April, just over 2 months later, Special Treasury Agents-turned-superintendents, and Severance himself, were seeing resistance by the Sea Island contrabands they directly worked with. They found themselves having to become promise breakers due to insufficient supplies from the government. They saw that they would have to endorse cotton planting and harvesting. They saw no real improvement for the people. And James Severance foresaw a failed Port Royal Experiment that could end by way of a violent mutiny unleashed by the 10,000 contrabands they were supposed to help. Now, the Experiment was barely up and running and being such an experiment that had never taken place before, setbacks were going to happen and in hindsight seemed inevitable. So, as the next month, rolled in, the military, Treasury, the War Department, and the abolitionists would have smoothed over these bumps and found a coherent path in order to bring success to the Experiment and for the lives of these contrabands, right? Well, May would prove that was easier said than done; in fact things, from Severance's observations, were steadily getting worse.

CHAPTER FOUR

MAY 1862, PART ONE

Introduction

As April 1862 drew to a close, abolitionist-educator Laura Towne wrote quite a bit about the enforcement of the cotton harvest and Edward Pierce's handling of the laborers in these cotton fields. Towne recorded that the contrabands made it known that \$1 an acre was not enough of an amount for wages and did not understand why they were to be paid on account. Meaning, they do not get paid until an appointed payday, where records showing how much they worked established how much they would be paid. Another issue for the contrabands, at least on Hilton Head Island where Towne resided, was that the land of former planters was not the contrabands' land, but was now government land. Yet without any real explanation, Towne claimed that despite the confusion over wages and land ownership, the contrabands were still "so willing to work" for Pierce. Another hang up that appeared to concern the contrabands more than the other two issues, was corn. They wanted that seed to plant their subsistence crops and have the time to do so, but Pierce, "had made it a rule that till a certain quantity of cotton is planted they shall not hoe the corn." After this, Towne moved on with the day, alluding that the patience and work of Pierce made the people content with their situation and all was well. However, that night at a meeting between the contrabands and superintendents, it was declared by one older man that, "The Yankees preach nothing but cotton." Even with this, the superintendents still sought to repeat the mantra that working the cotton was necessary. However, due to "past experiences," the contrabands were learning that the real profit of their labors in the cotton fields would "never get into [their] pockets."¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Rupert Sargent Holland, ed., *Letters and Diary of Laura Towne: Written in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862-1884* (Salem MA: Higginson Book Company, 1912), 18-20.

What Towne saw in the last days of April would be an issue still in May, as new issues and events would come with the new month. These included: an unauthorized and poorly enacted enlistment, applying more forceful oversight by agent-superintendents, and corruption in the ranks. While these caused Towne and others like her to be distressed, Severance would become irate with his employer, the Treasury Department. At the same time, he was also required to work under the War Department and abolitionist groups; Special Treasury Agents had too many ‘bosses’, each with their own ideas for the Experiment. Having too many bosses would push him past being irate; for he would vent again that the differing goals of numerous governmental departments were impairing the Experiment. The Experiment, he would declare again in May, would fail and the people of the Sea Islands would never respect nor trust the government or Northerners again. He would also write out an extreme measure he felt would redeem the whole venture: the government should dump all the cotton in the ocean, ridding itself and the world of the profit-driven crop. Doing away with this cotton, for Severance, would help the government save face with the contraband population and save the Experiment. May would be filled with events, conversations of resentment, troubles, and fears.

This month will be examined at length in two chapters. The first, covering the supposed usefulness of Harriet Tubman’s pending arrival, cotton enforcement, news of management restructuring, frustrated Special Treasury Agents, and fears of a Confederate attack. The second will focus General David Hunter’s emancipation proclamation and enlistment attempt, the consequences of his actions, and an escape from the battlefield made by a native of the islands. In his writings, Severance would denounce cotton planting, shared how his vocation was eerily similar to antebellum slave management, and what he thought of the continual poor treatment of the contrabands—realities that were deteriorating the Experiment’s chances for success.

The Needs Of The Experiment

On the first day of May, the Sea Islands were to have a special guest come and provide a hand of assistance to the Experiment. Only referred to in this day's entry simply as, "Moses," this guest, a female, was already well known among the Northerners and most contrabands. This "Moses" was Harriet Tubman. Tubman had for the past decade and half made news nationwide. She escaped from slavery in Maryland to Philadelphia, where she returned to save her family. She would continue these acts of rescue for many slaves, most taken to Canada. Her work with the famed Underground Railroad made her a thorn in the side to the South. When the war broke out, she was encouraged by the actions of General Ben Butler, and Edward Pierce, in the contraband issue at Fortress Monroe in Virginia. As the Experiment was starting in the South Carolina Sea Islands, Tubman, out of her pocket, put together a group of people from Boston and Philadelphia to head to the Sea Islands to take part.¹²⁵

Severance was pleased with news of Tubman's visit, yet Edward Pierce did not seem to agree. Pierce recounted that he heard from a Mr. Sanborn (also referred to as F.B.S) that Tubman was coming after Pierce had asked for a "capable man to aid him." Pierce had then asked, "If she could teach" and was answered with a "no." He then asked, "can she do anything of that sort?" Which was followed by the same answer. Pierce responded with, "then I don't see what can be done for her." Severance explained what Pierce had meant by that last statement: "For you see it takes a person of considerable tact and education to carry out this thing properly, and it is necessary at the stage that discipline should be used," and that it was questioned as to whether "Moses" would be that person. Pierce even asked, "what can they have thought of sending her our here for?" What should have been a celebrated arrival to boost the morale of the

¹²⁵ For more on Harriet Tubman see, Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2004). For more on what happened in Fortress Monroe see, chapter one of this thesis covers this in more detail.

contrabands and the Experiment, just ended up perplexing Pierce. Severance, to his credit, tried finding a positive aspect to Tubman's presence and offered it to Edward Pierce. "I ventured to him that it might ultimately be of use in teaching them [the black populace] to make good use of their liberty, in some such way as had been so well carried her out by her in Maryland, etc." Edward Pierce seemed to see the point being made, but shot it down. "Yes, that is all very well, but could not be done here." How is that? "We are all under Government here, and must be very cautious in our actions." Though he agreed with Severance that both men wanted to see these people freed, "we must grant that the Govt. has made a step forward, and we have a chance to do the some thing, but it is by Sufferance, and we are put upon our good behavior, as it were." Further, "it will not do to urge this matter—we must proceed cautiously, within limit of Govt. authority to [which] we are bound, and be thankful for what freedom we obtain."¹²⁶

In essence, Pierce, ever the lawyer, knew that this abolitionist-driven Experiment could not and should not exceed not just the authority granted them by the government. Also they should not outpace the government in the latter's drive to make the slave truly free. Severance, the young man raised by an active and outspoken abolitionist family, wanted to be on track with abolitionists to free these people, but do it by way of education. Which education would be best given by people like Harriet Tubman. Severance, unfortunately, did not record what he thought of Pierce's well-argued case. Severance did however hope for his abolitionist ideals to win out, but, he was keen enough, mature enough even, to see Pierce's point. Pierce was right to urge caution. Pierce had met with President Abraham Lincoln, Secretary of Treasury Salmon P. Chase, and many leaders of abolition groups while in Washington, D.C. And though the former wanted a slower pace within as much legal means as possible while Chase and abolitionists

¹²⁶ Severance Journal, May 1, 1862, 17-18.

wanted a faster pace, Pierce followed his Commander-in-Chief. Push too hard, and it could backfire politically in halls of Congress and White House. Push too hard, and Lincoln's strategy to keep the border states of Missouri, Maryland, Kentucky, and Delaware to at least maintain neutrality, would fail and all or most of them could then join the Confederacy.¹²⁷ It may seem ironic to modern readers that an experiment driven by abolitionism could not go fulfill its abolitionist plans, but had to wait until given approval by the government to free the people. That was a burden Pierce and others had to bear.

Enforcement Of Cotton Production

That same day, both Pierce and Severance went to visit on unnamed plantation that was on either Distant or Hilton Head Island that, was overseen by a Dr. Peck and Mr. Hooper. The purpose was to see how the cotton planting was coming, for Pierce had been there a week before. Before going out to the fields, Pierce told Severance, Peck, and Hooper that the first installment of the much promised, and delayed, pay had arrived and had "good effects" that were "perceptible." However, he warned that it was a small sum being paid out. Nevertheless, it would "seem" that the contrabands now "have more confidence" to see that "something is to be done" finally, and they also "evidently feel encouraged." Good news indeed! Just a couple of weeks earlier Severance worried this broken promise would lead to a mutiny. However, there was some realism attached to the news, for even then, Pierce was not wholly certain that the populace was really encouraged or had some of their confidence for the Experiment return. He said they *seem* to have confidence back. Even though it was plain to see some encouragement return, they could not confirm that the confidence had as well. They still needed to be careful.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ For more on the Border States and Lincoln's strategy for them see, William C. Davis, *Lincoln and the Border States: Preserving the Union* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

¹²⁸ Severance Journal, May 1, 1862, 18.

Now out in the fields, this plantation had in 1861 up to 57 acres planted. Pierce told of what happened here a week ago. When asked for a report on its current condition, only 8 acres had been planted, yet it was “expected to have 10 more by [Saturday],” which was when “they [the contrabands] should stop planting cotton.” Not willing to accept such a small yield, Pierce asked the reason for this small amount and why they should stop planting so soon. He was answered that they wanted to plant some corn and potatoes. Pierce in return asserted that, “they should hoe or plant no corn or potatoes till they had planted the cotton,” for it “must be done.” Further with the corn and potatoes, Pierce reminded them that should “any one [touch] the corn,” which was supplied by the government, they “would be arrested.” Following that reminder he demanded that 40 more acres be planted first. Now that Pierce was back a week later, now with Severance, Pierce was told only 30 of the 40 acres asked for had been planted.¹²⁹

What did Pierce say or do when told this? It will never be known, for Severance did not report on the ultimate conclusion of this event of cotton enforcement

This incident bares some similarity to what Laura Towne recorded. However, it gave some a more sympathetic lean toward Pierce compared to how Severance wrote down his experience. For Towne, she described Pierce’s enforcement of cotton planting at Coffin’s Point as, “very touching,” and to hear that the “negroes begging Mr. Pierce” were allowed to tend to corn instead of cotton for a time. Towne stated that these people “do not see the use cotton, but they know that their corn has kept from starvation,” which had made them anxious about the next year’s crop. Further, Pierce sought to clarify the need for cotton planting to, “make them contented,” for, “they are not now by any means.” While Towne saw Pierce as a patient and caring father-figure to these people, she stressed here as she did earlier in this chapter, that the

¹²⁹ Ibid., 18-19.

contrabands were done with cotton planting. They just wanted to plant their subsistence crop, for they knew of the crop's importance to their survival.¹³⁰

This clash, as it were, between Northerners focused on cotton, the cash-crop, and the freedpeople who were more oriented toward their subsistence farming, is well known and discussed by historians. Willie Lee Rose in *Rehearsal for Reconstruction* argues that crops and landownership were the twin pillars of what freedom meant for the contrabands. And helping them achieve both was how the government was going to prepare for the coming Reconstruction. Julie Saville in *The Work of Reconstruction*, also argues the twin pillar approach, but her argument centered on how the freedmen not only sought for it themselves, but that their persistence and resistance, caused Northerners to stop running plantations the Industrial North way, and allowed the freedpeople to farm their own way—a way they perfected after a few hundred years of experimenting while in bondage under the task-system. In Akiko Ochiai's *Harvesting Freedom*, Northerners came to the Sea Islands already with plans on how cotton production would be run to suit their Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men ideology as *the* way to adapt the contrabands to freedom. Upon arriving, they were amazed at how well the contrabands were in their farming and cotton production, which caused the Northerners to the ones adapting instead. Kevin Dougherty in *The Port Royal Experiment* saw this clash as the predecessor to nation building where the traditions of two peoples clashed. If not resolved to both people's likings, the "building" would never take place. Until now, there was no other way to see all this when sources such as Towne, Philbrick and Pierce recorded such observations from the top-down, as utilized by historians.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Laura Towne, 21.

¹³¹ Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina*,

However, with Severance, there was a striking contrast. He agreed with the contrabands doing their subsistence planting and that Northerners were to adapt instead. Severance saw the enforcement of cotton planting and making the contrabands conform to Northern ideals right away was *not* how things should be done. While it was good for Towne to be an educator, teaching the people to read, write, recite passages from the Constitution, and act civil, Severance wanted the people to be taught about freedom and liberty. What it was, what it meant for them, how they were to embrace, live it, and apply it the rest of their lives. Educate them, help them adapt to a new way of living, and do it carefully. If cotton planting was a step that had to be done to help them, he was fine with that, but forcing them to do it without sharing the “why,” would only lead to failure. The contrabands, in this view of Severance’s, were acting like any other American. For instance, at Valley Forge, during the American Revolution, Baron von Steuben discovered the American soldier could not just be told and forced to act a certain way, they had to be taught why they should follow his orders. Only then could they, by choice and not force, act, and eventually become, the type of soldier he, and the Revolution, needed. It was learning the “why” that made the Revolution a success, and that was the same method Severance wanted adopted in Port Royal. He saw them as having this very American reaction to orders in their blood, making them American in a way already. Even though they were not officially Americans, yet.

To end his account of Pierce’s enforcement however, Severance did record his thoughts on the condition of the contrabands at this point. “They are no slaves—to anybody, but¹³² are under the authority of the U.S. Govt. and subject to the military rule, as is everyone else. There

1860-1870 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Akiko Ochiai, *Harvesting Freedom: African American Agrarianism in Civil War Era South Carolina* (Westport CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004); Kevin Dougherty, *The Port Royal Experiment: A Case Study in Development* (Oxford: Mississippi University of Mississippi Press, 2014).

¹³² Emphasis mine

may be serious objections why they should not be told that they are freemen and bound to obey no one.” He made a valid point. The contrabands may be free from masters, but were now in a slave-like state where they are to obey the government. Additionally, objections could and would arise from these people as to why they cannot be free and not be bound to obey anyone or anything. Why was this? First off, they, according to Severance, were not “educated to know what the true signification [of freedom] is, and are apt to fall into the most extreme license.” He did not want them to be anarchical with the coming freedom, but be more mature and true to the sense of freedom, once educated as to what that term really meant. Second, “the race is in a transition state and every care must be taken that each step is understood by them, as ought also to be appreciated by them.” Here, he knew that they were in a state of limbo in regards to freedom. In order to take them out of limbo, again education was key, as well as being taught how to live this sought after freedom. And like Pierce, when he stated that, “care must be taken that each step is understood,” Severance saw the value in being cautious. Yet, since in a state of limbo at the present, the “negro race must be under a kindly paternal despotism, for his own and other’s good the superintendents acting in a sort of patriarchy.”¹³³

This sentiment of his just quoted above may seem contradictory from last month when he and a few superintendents despised acting in a tyrannical measure to enforce cotton growing. But when it came to freedom and liberty coming to a people long enslaved, Severance held a typical Northern view that they were to be the “parents” to raise “children” out of ignorance. And this “child rearing” had some form of “despotism” in its method to help these people. Despotism may have been a poor word choice, but Northerners like Severance knew some care and authority was needed before the contrabands were ready, and this authority would not

¹³³ Severance Journal, May 1, 1862, 19.

include whip and chains. In the end, Severance knew it did not help that the government came into Port Royal saying all the slaves were free, only to put them back into the fields and be beholden to government rule and treated not as freedmen. This transition state placed on the contrabands by the government, for Severance, was doing more harm than good.

The level of resistance taken by the contrabands throughout each location under Union occupation was neither uniform nor coordinated. In some areas, there can be found no record of any resistance having occurred. For Towne, on the far eastern end of Hilton Head, the contrabands seemed more content, worried, but content with their state and work. For those on Edisto Island, Pierce and Severance were told that the “negroes seem to be a different kind of people—they are out at Sunrise and work quite late, and are very little trouble,” and although the Superintendent on Edisto were “necessarily very much isolated, and have to act on their own responsibility almost entirely, which they seem to do very well.” Overall, Pierce and Severance were given “very good accounts” of the contrabands and state of affairs on the island. These varied experiences by Severance, Pierce, Towne, and others regarding to reactions and actions of the contrabands on various islands and plantation was not explained by either person. It can only be presumed that resistance or contentment depended on the how rule by superintendents was applied, the personality of the contrabands themselves, or the contrabands past experiences with their ex-masters. Or perhaps all three combined. Either way in an area with a uniform system of labor, the task-system, which offered more autonomy, the contrabands were not giving uniform responses to the application of the Experiment. These varied responses were not making the running of the Experiment any smoother for Severance and others.¹³⁴ So ended a long and eventful day for Severance.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 19.

Black Enlistment: The Early Days

To end the day's entry, Severance recorded news from the front lines. Though "nothing is sure" and that "we must wait a while patiently" for confirmation, news had come that General Butler had taken the South's premier port: New Orleans, "shipping and all!" The Blockade now had another crucial port to enforce the Anaconda Plan, and this victory in New Orleans was key to ending the war. Port Royal would not be the U.S. Navy's only port-centric success. As things moved slowly, very much so, in Port Royal and the Experiment, at this point, the war was going better for the North, at least on the water.¹³⁵

The following day, Severance heard about Edward Pierce's coachmen, an ex-slave from the area named Jim Cashman had also been acting as a guide for military-governor General David Hunter's forces in the area. Because of this, Hunter, who had wanted Cashman by his side permanently, commissioned Cashman as a sergeant. Being a commissioned sergeant gave to Cashman one additional duty that Hunter wanted fulfilled earnestly: recruiting the male contrabands into regiments. Cashman's role was to be more of a precursor to Hunter's grander plan: the creation of two all-black regiments. One such recruit that came by way of Cashman was asked why he wanted to enlist. He answered with, "For Liberty, Sir!" This unnamed recruit and his response gave Hunter the encouragement he needed to see if his recruitment would succeed.¹³⁶

To help Sergeant Cashman and the military, Pierce gave a pass detailing how "all [superintendents] and others are asked to give him [Cashman] all the aid he needs, " even to the

¹³⁵ Ibid., May 3, 1862, 20.

¹³⁶ Ibid., May 4, 1862, 21.

point that it “hurt the work on the places [in other words hurt the cotton harvest], not opposing any one’s desire to enlist.” Severance, however, felt that “there is no general desire so to do—the negro seems to have no desire to become a soldier, and his love of home and family are great.” Individuals such as Cashman and the unnamed recruit, to Severance, were the exception, not the rule. Yet, even with his hesitations in seeing a flood of recruits, reports from Washington, D.C. may have been factors in generating a stronger desire to leave family and home for the army.¹³⁷

The people in Port Royal had just read, or heard, that Lincoln signed a bill that abolished slavery in the nation’s capital; that the Senate by a wide majority passed “[Charles] Sumner’s bill” for the “recognition of Hayti [sic] and Liberia,” and that many “Congressmen seem to favor a broad Confiscation & Emancipation Bill.” These political victories were a boon for abolitionism. Slavery was no more in the nation’s capital. Two nations of freemen (one formed by violent revolution and the other by transplanting both freemen and runaways to the West African Coast) would have their ambassadors accepted in Washington, D.C., as well as having American ambassadors sent to their nations. These two events were great in themselves, yet, to hear that Congress may pass not just a broader confiscation bill that would grant more slaves “contraband” status, but that an Emancipation bill could be passed to free all slaves in the South would be the feather in the cap for abolitionism. With these victories in D.C., a successful conclusion for the Port Royal Experiment was now closer to being achieved. Additionally, this news from D.C. may also have helped encourage the contrabands of the Sea Islands to fight for their coming freedom and prove themselves worthy of it. For Severance, he knew the people here just had to wait and see if the good news would indeed bring about a flood of recruits. Severance spoke nothing of Hunter or the plans for recruitment for the next few days, as if he

¹³⁷ Ibid., 21-22. For more on Cashman see, Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 144-145.

brushed this event involving Sergeant Cashman as a singular, unconnected event he would not be confronted with again.¹³⁸

Laura Towne also saw contrabands desiring to be soldiers. However, her story did not have an ending like Sergeant Cashman's and bears some resemblance with Severance's feelings toward why he felt a majority of the people would not enlist. Will Capers, a cabinetmaker by profession during his enslavement, described as "intelligent and self-respecting," had to work in the fields, for there was no cabinetwork for him in the occupied Sea Islands. Capers made it publicly known to Mr. Pierce that he did not want to work in the fields, nor belonged near a field. Pierce asked if he wanted to be a soldier then, with "Yes, sah," as Capers' answer. Another individual now joined Capers as Pierce proceeded to act as Drill Sergeant and "drilled them a little." Pierce being a Private in the infantry before coming to Port Royal was skilled in drilling and now acted the instructor, no longer the new recruit. Pierce left an impact on these two men. A couple of days later, Towne saw Will Capers standing by a carriage that was going to take her to her destination. When she asked him where she knew him from, he said that he was, "one of the soldiers, ma'am." Towne then ended this with: "so this man, an intelligent, reliable negro," had gone back to the field after his stint as soldier, instructed by Pierce. So, not only did Severance's belief that due to love of home and family keeping prospects of many recruits low, Towne's event of the realities of soldiering also showed that the majority of the male contraband population was less than willing to become soldiers, as Hunter wanted to believe.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Ibid., 22. The "broad Confiscation" bill spoken of would become the Confiscation Act of 1862. It was passed July 17, 1862. This Act declared that any Confederate official, civilian or military personnel that did not free their slaves within 60 days of the Acts passing, would have their slaves freed by way of criminal proceedings. The caveat was that the freeing of slaves was to take place in areas under Union occupation.

¹³⁹ *Laura Towne, 27-28.*

Fear Of Confederate Attack

Even with military success in New Orleans and some political successes in D.C., the people and the Experiment were not any safer now than they were just a few weeks ago when a Michigan unit was ambushed in Georgia, as recorded in the previous chapter. While walking along a beach on the night of May 5, Severance and an unknown number of fellow companions came upon members of one of “the outer pickets, under Capt. Dimmock[sic],”¹⁴⁰ that had gone “upon the main land, to reconnoitre[sic]” a few days previous. While on the mainland the picket had “to beat a retreat,” or, “they would have been taken if they had not succeeded in pulling up part of a bridge.” This destruction of a bridge “stopped their pursuers, almost within pistol shot.” Of the members recounting this close call, one had just been ordered to return to duty, of which he relayed that it “might be serious work...before he got thro’.”¹⁴¹

After writing down his encounter with the men of the 50th Pennsylvania, Severance added his own thoughts of the war and where he was located. “Such things as these serve to keep one’s mind alive to the fact that we are but a few miles from the main, and it would not be a very difficult thing to capture the whole of us, for all the defence [sic] we could make.” He admitted that often he remembered that not only was he close to both the South Carolina mainland and Confederate lines, but that even with the garrison they had on the islands and any defense the non-military personnel could put up, they all could be defeated and captured. Not a satisfying

¹⁴⁰ This would be Captain Gordon Z. Dimock, Co. D of the 50th Pennsylvania Infantry. For more on the 50th Pennsylvania, *History of the Fiftieth Regiment, Penna. Vet. Vols. 1861-1865* (Reading PA: Coleman Printing House, 1884).

¹⁴¹ Severance Journal, May 5, 1862, 22. Where exactly this encounter took place was not recorded, nor can it be found where and when exactly this patrol came under attack before making make to their lines. The name of the bridge also cannot be pinpointed.

thought to have when involved in an abolitionist influenced experiment to help free slaves, while taking land and other property from secessionists.¹⁴²

However, Severance had another confession for those in the Sea Islands at this time. “We live and sleep here as unconsciously, almost, as if at home, and I sometimes stop and think, in wonder, how coolly we do take the matter.” They were under constant threat, yet he and others at times felt as “if at home.” This was an odd reaction for one in a war zone. One would think they would be more on guard, more cautious of their situation. This explains why things were going so haphazardly for the Experiment, almost ready to fail, as Severance feared. This explains why Laura Towne recorded Pierce saying that there was no real system at play for the Experiment, as discussed in the previous chapter. Those involved with the Experiment were very confident in their work and in the army and navy to protect them, despite the ambushes, attacks on pickets, and ever-present reminders of an enemy nearby.¹⁴³

Or, they were just too busy to be reminded of the realities of war. Severance continued: “In fact, I hardly realize that we are in an Enemy’s Country, almost cut off and surrounded by him.” Just about contradicting himself, Severance not only described that he at times forgot he was surrounded and in enemy territory, he emphasized that they are almost cut off.¹⁴⁴ While almost cut off, “only occasionally are we roused by a skirmish here or an attack there,” and that pickets were “stationed all over these islands.” These pickets reminded one unnamed individual to comment that these Islands were a ““mighty ticklish place.”” Severance would emphasize, “one of the most ticklish places, in fact,” and both men were glad to have pickets out and active. Fortunately, despite this lackadaisical attitude towards a war zone, there was maturity. Severance

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Luckily for them the navy in Port Royal Sound and off the coast ensured that isolation would be impossible.

noticed that now “there is none of that perpetual excitement and apprehension that I could think of at home as connected with life here.” Going off to a new place liberated by war and partaking of an experiment during the conflict seemed exciting and fun back in Boston. Being in a warzone for that Experiment caused Severance to be more serious about what he was doing, where he was doing it, and when. This was no longer a game, an adventure; it was now a time for serious reflection and hard, organized labor to achieve success. Additionally, some measures were made to help enable word got out if the Islands came under attack. “[A]rrangments all made, for the negroes to carry the word to Beaufort, thro’ the woods and over the river, in case any here should be carried off.” Many appeared frightened of this, for why else would such a measure be prepared? The people in the Experiment now worked quickly for success and to guarantee that they were safe to do so. They no more relied on the military alone, but now worked, in some fashion, with the military. Meaning that they were finding ways to be more pro-active in defending themselves.¹⁴⁵

For more details on the military situation in the Sea Islands, Laura Towne found out from Lieutenants Gregory and Belcher of the 8th Michigan Regiment (around the time Severance was talking with the men of the 50th PA), that on Hilton Head Island itself, there were 4,000 stationed, with a total of 15,000 for the entire Port Royal Sound area. As for the Confederates, they “are concentrating around us. They have already 20,000 surrounding us and may take it into their heads to rout us. Their approach would be in three directions, one through this island [Hilton Head].” Again, that fourth direction was the ocean, protected by the US Navy.¹⁴⁶ Not only almost entirely surrounded, they were outnumbered.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 22-23.

¹⁴⁶ *Laura Towne*, 34. The full names of both lieutenants were Asa Gregory (also the regiment’s Quartermaster) and Horatio Belcher.

Coming Changes For The Experiment

A few days later, via a letter from his mother, Caroline, dated mid-April, Severance discovered a change was coming to the Experiment. During a dinner party that had in attendance Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, Ohio Senator John Sherman, and Indiana Senator Schulyer Colfax, "Mother had a long talk with C[hase] about P. Royal." During this 'long talk', Chase said that he "should have to give up control of...to some one, who should have entire charge." And this someone to take charge meant that, "the whole thing would then come under the War Dept." Severance interjected his own thoughts that hearing the War Department under Edwin Stanton was to control the Experiment, "gives color to the rumor that we have heard, that the direction of the matter had been given to Stanton." According to Severance, this change in leadership was not a surprise move, but had been anticipated for some time, now to be confirmed from Chase's mouth by way of Caroline Severance. Had Severance's words in April fearing failure and mutiny reached Washington, D.C.? Did Pierce's joking comment about no system existing for the Experiment unsettle Lincoln? Or did the Lincoln Administration realize that having two masters head the Experiment not only did harm thus far, but had also caused a useless and confusing situation? The latter was more likely since the Experiment was happening in a time of war and it only made sense to have the War Department take the reins, with the Treasury in a secondary role.

It made sense that consolidation should be enacted because, since February, Pierce had been in conflict with Colonel William Reynolds over who had the most authority to be in charge of both contrabands and cotton. Both men went to their own bosses; Pierce to Chase and Reynolds to Stanton, many times, with no real resolution. The Treasury men claimed authority, while the military stressed they were in charge because of the war. During these power struggles,

representatives from various abolitionist groups went to D.C. asking for Pierce to be given nominal command of cotton and contrabands. Agreeing a single individual with authority was needed, Lincoln, Stanton, and Chase met with others in a committee to decide who that individual would be. It was decided that if Pierce would not accept a military rank to show his authority, a military officer should be chosen. Pierce rejected the commission and agreed an officer was needed and suggested General Rufus Saxton, a suggestion that was approved. However, until he arrived, Pierce would be granted temporary command, but with the caveat that details would be ironed out later. They would not be ironed out more fully until just before Saxton arrived in July.¹⁴⁷

Yet, how would did change affect Severance? He wondered the same thing: “How this may change affairs I do not know, but there will no doubt be some alteration.” He would just have to wait and see what happened.¹⁴⁸

Back to events happening in the Sea Islands, Severance did comment that much of the land under Union occupation was good land, specifically that the area was, “a fine country.” One place in particular that Pierce wanted taken care of by competent men had, “one of the best situations a man [could] have.” In fact, Severance admitted he had a, “great desire to see the

¹⁴⁷ Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 151-153; Dougherty, *The Port Royal Experiment*, 29-30, 34. An incident in early May 1862 that underscored the conflict between Treasury and War Departments, that needed to be corrected, was the case of the physical attack made on Edward Pierce by Colonel William H Nobles. Col. Nobles was in charge of the some of the cotton agents, he being second in command to Colonel Reynolds. Nobles, and those agents directly under him, were notorious for their grafting from cotton and moveable property sales, not paying the freedmen and obstructing both Treasury Agents and abolitionists. After much abuse, Pierce and others reported Nobles to Washington, D.C., where in turn the Secretary of Treasury, Salmon P. Chase, ordered Col. Reynolds to hear from Pierce his charges against Nobles and take action accordingly. Reynolds found the order humiliating, while Nobles was outraged. He confronted Pierce on May 7, 1862, at the docks of Hilton Head and proceeded to beat him in public. Nobles, known for his violent temper, was promptly released from his position and transferred out. His removal, and some humbling on Reynolds’ part, eased tensions a bit and again emphasized the needed for consolidated management. Unfortunately, for whatever reason, this event was not recorded by Severance. For more on Nobles see *Laura Towne*, 60; Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 68-69, 141; Dougherty, *The Port Royal Experiment*, 31, 113, 140; Ochiai, *Harvesting Freedom*, 59-60, 65.

¹⁴⁸ Severance Journal, May 7, 1862, 24-25.

place.” This narrow area within the Sea Islands was northern Edisto Island.¹⁴⁹ Pierce wanted to send a Mr. Orrel[sic]¹⁵⁰ to Edisto. The latter confessed he had no desire to leave where he was currently located, for he had, “everything all arranged where he is,” but Pierce was able to persuade him to at least check it out. A Mr. Alden¹⁵¹ also said he wanted to join Orrel[sic] at Edisto. Even though once again we are left without closure by Severance as to whether these men stayed in Edisto or not, we do have his statement that sounds very similar to the situation Messrs. Thorpe and Park found themselves in as discussed in the previous chapter. In Edisto, there were only “6 or 7 of our men there, and 1300 negroes!” Thorpe and Park had thirteen plantations combined under their supervision, while 6 or 7 men had an unknown number of plantations, but 1300 contrabands to oversee. This situation on Edisto “must be very lonely,” it was reminiscent of the antebellum days where slaves vastly outnumbered the white population on a plantation. Additionally, having so few men to care for so many while trying to keep up with demands of cotton in a Union occupied area, gives us another testament of the impractical situation the Experiment and its people found themselves under. Not having enough people was

¹⁴⁹ Edisto is located northeast of Port Royal Island and lies just about the halfway point between Port Royal Sound and Charleston.

¹⁵⁰ John Orrell was a Unitarian Preacher from Sandwich, MA. He was onboard the *Oriental* with Severance and Laura Towne. His name appears on Severance’s “manifest” as well as Towne’s.

¹⁵¹ This “Mr. Alden” is harder to pinpoint. There were two Aldens working for the Experiment: John A. and William H. The former, according to the published journals of the Northern scholar, William Francis Allen, *A Yankee Scholar in Coastal South Carolina: William Francis Allen’s Civil War Journals*, edited by James Robert Hester (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), was made a Freedmen’s Bureau superintendent for Edisto in 1865 by his brother’s recommendation. It cannot be determined through Severance’s papers or any other primary sources as to whether Severance means John or William or some other Alden. At least William, and maybe John, came under the jurisdiction of the New England Freedmen’s Aid Society. Yet, only William Alden is found specifically listed as arriving to Port Royal in February 1862 with other members of the society, such as Edward Philbrick. As of yet, no record of when John Alden arrived can be found. So, the chance is more than likely, but not firmly concluded, that Severance was referring to William Alden here. No other known Aldens are listed prior to 1864 or any other record.

one of many factors, according to Severance (as can be recalled by past comments), as to why the Experiment was on the path to failure.¹⁵²

The same day Severance talked about Edisto, he was told about some more information that helped explained what would be going on with the Experiment. This information would coincide with what he heard from his mother just days earlier. Edward Pierce received some letters from Chase, “[which] told him that Rufus Saxton was to come down,” and asked Pierce to, “accept an office under Saxton, with a rank not under Captain, but no higher than Colonel. Whatever rank he chose, he was to “get it readily.” Referring to a joke that was not recorded on paper, Severance said that, “if this is true, my joke about our being Commissioned may not be so far from the truth, after all!” It would appear then that once news spread previous to this event that the War Department was to take sole charge of the Experiment, at least Severance had the idea, albeit jokingly, that all persons under the Treasury Department would become commissioned officers to make it more official once their new boss, Secretary Edwin Stanton, took charge. What a novel thing that could have been, if played out.¹⁵³

Rufus B. Saxton, from Greenfield, MA, was a Quartermaster and Brigadier General (later Major General) for the military when he arrived at Port Royal, being aboard DuPont’s flagship, the *Wabash*. Not long after the capture of Port Royal, he was in charge of defenses as a captain around Harpers Ferry in Virginia (now West Virginia), in which during CSA General “Stonewall” Jackson’s 1862 Valley Campaign, his efforts to defend the ferry would win him the Medal of Honor in 1893. Known as an abolitionist, and sympathetic to the needs and well being of the contrabands, Saxton’s appointment at Port Royal was seen as a positive for abolitionists working for the Experiment. He was also tactful and cautious when dealing with abolitionists,

¹⁵² Severance Journal, May 9, 1862, 27.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

the ideas of emancipation, and what authority he had as a military officer at the time. He would play a much larger role in the Experiment in the summer and early autumn of 1862 when made a temporary Military Governor over the Department of the South, replacing Hunter (more on that later), until the replacement arrived. He would not arrive to Port Royal until July.¹⁵⁴

With the good news of who was coming in to help with the Experiment, more news came in that may have made all those in Port Royal breath easier, hoping it signaled that the end of the war was near. Word had arrived that, “Yorktown [Virginia] has been evacuated by the rebels, and McClellan is “‘marching on’—And the fleet has got up on the Mississippi above [New] Orleans as far as Baton Rouge, so the rebels are hemmed in on both sides, at Memphis [Tennessee].” In a form of celebration, Severance penned, “On we go! What next, I wonder.” With McClellan about to march on Richmond and almost the entire Mississippi in Union hands, which would split the Confederacy, victory seemed imminent.¹⁵⁵

Once again, wages became a thorny issue for the Experiment. Mr. Eustis, who was overseeing a plantation that Severance was lodging at, had gone to Wassaw Island¹⁵⁶ to “pay off the men.” Eustis did not; it seemed, to expect the reaction he received from the men. In fact, Severance too seemed surprised. “Some were disgusted at the sum that they refused it!” With no real consolation with his next words, these same men were guaranteed that more pay was coming by way of Pierce, for work done late last month. Pierce’s and Towne’s temporary plan to pay off

¹⁵⁴ For more on Saxton, “Civil War Medal of Honor Citations Last Names starting with “S” to “Z,” *Civil War Medal of Honor citations* (S-Z): Saxton, Rufus,” accessed March 25, 2016, AmericanCivilWar.com; Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 153-154.

¹⁵⁵ Severance Journal, May 9, 1862, 27.

¹⁵⁶ Wassaw Island is really one of the Georgia Sea Islands, which is located about south-southeast of Savannah. The island was occupied around the same time as the South Carolina Sea Islands and the fall of Fort Pulaski.

the men as best they could out of pocket had now turned from some acceptance, to annoyance, to now “disgust.” That mutiny Severance feared just may be around the corner. Those broken promises, must be redeemed in full now, not small payments here and there.¹⁵⁷

The Lost Hopes And Damnations Expressed By Special Treasury Agents

On May 11, 1863 many Treasury Agents-Superintendents established that they were at their wits end because of their duty to oversee the cotton planting. However, they would be blindsided by a stunning episode that would play out the next day. These two events would, for Severance at least, become near-breaking points for the Experiment. The failure and possible mutiny was around the corner even more so after these two events to be discussed took place.

The first event occurred during a dinner between Severance, Thorpe, Park (the same men from last chapter), and Arthur Sumner. The dinner was held at the residence Sumner was assigned to. Living on St. Helena, the stunning view of the Beaufort River and Cat and Parris Islands¹⁵⁸ from this residence, would not assuage the venting to come. “[W]e have quite a talk on the state of affairs, present and future. The three are earnest in the work, and P[ark] & T[horpe] have really worked themselves sick.” Thorpe “is so conscientious about it that he is in a perpetual worry lest he should not do has he ought to by these, and they probably see that he is taking so much trouble with them, and so act the worse.”¹⁵⁹ Despite this setback, there is much to discover within this opening of the dinner conversation Severance recorded. Recall that Thorpe and Park had vented their frustrations to Severance just a month ago. They were frustrated over not being able to fulfill promises of pay and adequate clothing. Frustrated that the government

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., May 10, 1862, 28.

¹⁵⁸ Cat and Parris Islands are northwest and west, respectively, of St. Helena Island, immediately across the Beaufort River. To imagine them from another angle, both islands lay immediately east and south, respectively, of the southern end of Port Royal Island and the town of Port Royal.

¹⁵⁹ Again, Severance relied too much on the pronoun “they”, that it becomes difficult to know exactly which individuals make up the “they” found in his writing of this dinner conversation.

was putting them in a tough spot with the contrabands. And they were frustrated that they were encountering resistance from the contrabands. Now, a month later, these two men (and now with Sumner) had been in a constant state of worry and this worry had caused them to work even harder. Whether being sick meant physically, mentally, or emotionally, we are not told. It can only be imagined that all three are taking shape at the same time. Thorpe, Park, and Sumner were eager to compensate for the broken promises; they do not want to fail these contrabands. “They” who were seeing these men overwork themselves were most likely the contrabands. By “act[ing] worse,” the most likely meaning for this phrase was that the contrabands were resisting more, acting in ways that made the agents more worried. Quite possibly, they wanted to drive these promise breakers out.¹⁶⁰

Three different individuals (not in attendance of the dinner Severance wrote about) reported their own observations validate this interpretation. The first is Richard Soule, General Superintendent of Ladies and St. Helena Islands. He noted that the contrabands had a, “great reluctance to work on the cotton-fields without some substantial evidence that they are to be paid for their labor.” Soule felt certain, along with what Thorpe and Park said in April, that had “a certain amount of money in part payment of their wages” be distributed among all these workers, they, the workers, would be reassured. The second individual was a contraband residing in Coffin’s Point, where Laura Towne was stationed. This unnamed individual declared, “what’s the use of our wor[ki]ng for Driver and massa”¹⁶¹ without the promised payment? Lastly, Edward Philbrick, who reported that he had become so frustrated that many of the workers were

¹⁶⁰ Severance Journal, May 11, 1862, 30.

¹⁶¹ This is very crucial to keep in mind, for it will be touched on more below.

leaving their work early by going fishing or planting their subsistence crops. He and the driver¹⁶² were both discouraged and groaned: “it’s no use bothering with such people.”¹⁶³

Continuing the dinner conversation, Severance provided an example of Thorpe and Park’s overworked and worried state. They “went into the field yesterday, and actually sat there all day, until the negroes had completed their tasks of planting cotton.” Due to experiences paralleled with Philbrick’s where he had discovered that when wholly supervised, the contrabands just up and left the cotton fields, Thorpe and Park were forced to stay and keep vigilant eyes on all their workers until the quota for the day was in fact completed. Having to stay and monitor unceasingly their unknown number of field hands, it was no wonder these men were exhausting themselves. And they knew it to! Thorpe in vexation exclaimed: “And I made up my mind then that it was the last time I should act the ‘nigger-driver’ for anybody.” By having to sit and watch to ensure work was done, Thorpe, and most likely Park, had had enough. They would not babysit the contrabands. They would no more force these contrabands to work, not even for the government. To emphasize this, Thorpe compared himself to a “nigger-driver,” a term, a name really, chosen carefully. Northerners, specifically abolitionists, had used this derogatory name for slave owners.¹⁶⁴ No more could Thorpe, at least, see himself as some type of liberator working on behalf of a government set to free the slaves. He now saw his work transforming himself into something he hated: a slave owner. When these government workers

¹⁶² From antebellum to the end of the war, drivers were enslaved supervisors found on most large plantations. They had been given some authority by the master and worked under the overseers.

¹⁶³ Richard Soule, Letter to Edward Pierce, 29 March 1862, in Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*. Series I, vol. 3 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 179. Edward Philbrick, Letter to Ned Atkinson, 12 April 1862, in *Freedom*, ser. I, vol. 3, 186-187.

¹⁶⁴ John D. Wright, *The Language of the Civil War* (Westport: Connecticut Onyx Press, 2001), 205.

saw themselves in such disparaging ways, they were becoming close to joining the contrabands in resisting the government.¹⁶⁵

At this point, Severance was either interjecting his own thoughts as he recalled this dinner conversation, or was simply paraphrasing what was spoken after Thorpe's bold statement: "Why we should feel obliged to compel these men to work at cotton with such scanty and delaying pay, is a nice moral question, I think."¹⁶⁶ Here, Severance's abolitionist upbringing had made itself present in his mind. Was it truly moral for the United States and its government employees to *compel* men to work for what was essentially nothing? Can it even be validated that the work of the government here in Port Royal was moral? To be able call these people free, but treat them otherwise? Was the work of Severance and his fellow agents still morally supported or had they lost the moral argument over which side, North or South, had the better interests to offer over 4 million people?

Severance seemed to think that the Union and the Experiment was losing itself morally and that would cause much to be lost. "If cotton must be raised, and if it for their good that this work must be done, have we a right to engage in such a *tyrannical* mode of having this work done, which must look to them little better than their former slavery, treating them like slaves, obliging them to work at cotton, threatening and sometimes punishing them for not doing it, breaking promises unavoidably perhaps, paying them late and in small sums." How reminiscent to what he wrote last month! His abolitionism was in full swing now. He was making a strong case. Here came the Union telling these slaves they were free. A Union whose people for the past

¹⁶⁵ Severance Journal, May 11, 1862, 30. Although Thorpe, by this statement, makes it appear he was done as an agent-supervisor, it will be noted here that he stayed on, but was soon replaced. The reason for his replacement and who replaced him will be commented on later in this chapter. Why he decided to stay despite what he said is not known today.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

40 years made themselves out to be the better, more civilized, humane, and liberty loving Americans compared to the South. Holding such views and bringing them to the South, along with so much hope for the Sea Islands over 10,000 slaves—only to break promises, punish, threaten, and become tyrannical. Only to bring to these people expecting freedom, a new form of slavery, which just happened to be not so different than their “former slavery.” As an abolitionist, and not as a Treasury Agent, Severance was essentially asking: “are we better than these Southern slave owners? Are we still in the right and the more moral people by treating these people as such?” Again, he felt the North has lost most, if not all, its credibility now. To end these thoughts, he now tried to see this moral crisis of the Experiment from a different point of view: “There may be a politic way of looking at all this, but to a humane person it would seem as tho’ there might be another way.” He tried to see it from a political, less abolitionist point of view. That there was a justified reason for what was lamented above, but he could not do it. In fact he too felt degraded when he said a more “humane person” would obviously see that another way, a better way, of growing cotton and treating these contrabands was possible. However, the government needed to see it too and apply it.¹⁶⁷

Now Arthur Sumner spoke out. This educator who sailed on the *Oriental* with Severance and Laura Towne, was tasked to be a superintendent on behalf of a sick friend. He told these men that he had received a note from Pierce early that day. Pierce wanted Sumner to join Thorpe and Park by taking charge of some of their thirteen plantations and to “help them thro’.” The note also said there would be no more cotton planting to be done for an unspecified amount of time and that, in an attempt of reassurance, “another payment” was coming soon. To this, Sumner remarked that, “he did not come down here to drive men into the cotton business, whether they

¹⁶⁷ Severance Journal, May 11, 1862, 30.

would or no, and he will not do it.” He had already done some work as superintendent. That time however, he had not been asked to help two men who were stressed out nor had he apparently heard anything concerning what these particular men had gone through. Now having gone through such exhausting work and hearing these men out, he agreed with Thorpe—he was not here to force people to work. He did not care if there were some who wanted to work the plantations; it was not his purpose coming to Port Royal to make men work. He was an educator; he was here to enlighten these contrabands in preparation for citizenship.¹⁶⁸

The Experiment was now witnessing two groups of people resisting, losing faith in the Experiment, and the Federal government: the contrabands and the Special Treasury Agents (with some educators included). The former was leaving work early. Others refused to work. Most were grumbling over broken promises and having to work cotton still. And many gave those like Severance a feeling that a mutiny was in the air. As for the latter group, these men employed by the government, or here as volunteers from various abolitionist groups, came to realize that they were just another set of slave drivers and overseers. They unconsciously were breaking promises and were ordered to force the contrabands to work. These Northerners were losing faith in themselves and their cause. Hope for the Experiments and its goals were waning. Though not actively resisting, they were making it known to some that they were either done acting like the “nigger-driver” or would not even begin to act as such. The Experiment was not even 4 months old, and it was not looking good.

Even Laura Towne was distraught by the means used by the government and its agents to get the people to continue cotton planting. “The danger now seems to be—not that we shall be called enthusiasts, abolitionists, philanthropists, but cotton agents, negro-drivers, oppressors”

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 30.

because, “gentleman have been determined to make the negroes show what they can do in the way of cotton, unwhipped.” Despite this determination, “they have only changed the mode of compulsion. They *force* men to prove they are to be free men by holding a tyrant’s power over them. Almost every one who has attempted this has failed.” Contrariwise, “[t]hose who have not attempted driving are loved and obeyed.” Thorpe and Park were assuredly found with the latter; those of the non-driving group. However, that does not take away from the fact that this abolitionist-educator was now convinced that she and others would be compared to slave owners, whose work and influence they were trying to undo. And they were being compared as such because they were forcing men to prove their ability to be free; applying a new “mode of compulsion” made them no different than slaveholders. With contrabands and Northerners beginning to see abolitionists in Port Royal as “negro-drivers” and “oppressors,” the Experiment was on the path of failure.¹⁶⁹

More Trouble Brewing

After this gloomy and edgy dinner conversation, Severance, Thorpe, and Park rode back to their lodgings. We are not told how late it was at this point, but that the moon was out. While riding along, Severance remembered that they had caught “sight of a large body of men coming towards us, and as we near them we catch the glimmer of the moon on their guns. In another moment we are in their midst, and are tempted to believe in Secesh.”¹⁷⁰ Afraid, these men were calmed when; “they [the group of men] pass[ed] on wishing us ‘Good-evening,’ and are soon out of sight, 25-30 in all.” Soon afterwards they came “upon a horseman, who proves to be Captain

¹⁶⁹ *Laura Towne*, May 19, 1862, 55. Emphasis hers.

¹⁷⁰ It should be remembered that the people involved with the Experiment were aware, though did not act as if they were at times, that the Confederate Army had forces on the mainland, ready to strike back. There was constant fear of being captured and hopes that stronger pickets would be formed and that more pickets in general would be created. So it being dark, and with the knowledge that the enemy was so near, it should be surprising for readers that these men’s first thoughts upon seeing these groups of men was that the enemy was attacking.

Stevens,” and “soon we meet... a larger party, 50 perhaps. We wonder at it, and can think of nothing plausible but that it the relieving party to the pickets, or, rather, the new pickets; for there are none here.” Another possibility was, that “there must be some trouble on a planation.” Still pondering what they had just witnessed, these three men simply kept going, arriving at their lodgings and going to sleep, forgetting this event. However, this event will become something bigger than they could ever have imagined. And for some people like Severance, it would be an event that could end the Experiment.¹⁷¹

Conclusion

It was not even yet mid-May and already the Experiment, and those participating, was being shaken up by events. Edward Pierce was wearying of the idea of a celebrity and symbol of abolition, Harriet Tubman, coming to Port Royal since she would not be doing anything, in his eyes, practical for the Experiment. He wanted educators to teach, not someone who would possibly press emancipation too much and too soon before the Lincoln Administration was ready. The laborers were no more content with the temporary measures taken by Pierce and Towne to make up for the lack of wages. The laborers were tired of working with cotton. This discontent and cotton-fatigue was also felt by agent-superintendents such as Messrs. Thorpe, Park, and Sumner, who now saw themselves as being akin to those people they detested when they were back home in the North: the “nigger-driver.” Sensitive to this comparison, these men, and most likely others not recorded, were now beyond worried; they were morally and mentally exhausted and distraught. For them, and Severance, what was the point of their work, and the Experiment as a whole, if the status quo for the Sea Islands 10,000 contrabands remained? How could they claim to be here as liberators and educators, if, as Severance saw and heard when with

¹⁷¹ Severance Journal, May 11, 1862, 30-31.

Pierce, that cotton was enforced upon the laborers to the point of threats of jail and keeping them from subsistence planting?

May was just a few weeks old at this point. The Experiment had just begun in February, some three months ago, and already some people, specifically Severance, were beginning to be physically and emotionally drained in trying to uphold their optimism for the abolitionist ideals of the Experiment—and its success. As for good news, word came that leaders in Washington, D.C. would now consolidate the management of the Experiment, another pressing issue, along with the nation's capital abolishing slavery within its boundaries. These advancements gave them some hope that things would get better from then on out. However, Severance and everyone in the Sea Islands were about to witness one man's aspirations that had the potential to undo any positive gains for the Experiment: Hunter's proclamation and enlistment.

CHAPTER FIVE MAY 1862, PART 2

Introduction

The previous chapter saw many highs and lows that centered on cotton and management. The latter being that, as Willie Lee Rose put it in *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, “there were too many chiefs and too few Indians at Port Royal.” Although Severance and other Special Treasury Agents were employed under the Treasury Department, they also worked under the War Department and helped the abolitionist associations out. Each “chief” had their orders and ideas for the Experiment and the agents were caught in the middle trying to please all. With the former, cotton planting, the problems of paying for that work and allotting time for subsistence farming had yet to be resolved. News filtered through that Washington, D.C. was going to merge the “many chiefs” into one, the War Department. Other news included Washington, D.C. abolishing slavery within its borders. Many saw these two events as things looking good for the Experiment, that it was making success seem more of a guarantee.¹⁷²

However, into the midnight hours following a dinner among four men, Severance being one of them, they would hear and later witness one of the “many chiefs” implement his dreams of creating all-black regiments. This would become known as General Hunter’s emancipation proclamation and enlistment. This dream-turned-reality would have long lasting, far-reaching, and demoralizing consequences for the Experiment and dispiriting reactions by Severance. A reaction where he furiously wrote down his demand for the government to enact an order to save the Experiment: dumping cotton and end its addiction to it. After this enlistment attempt, news came of corruption within the ranks of the military and the military-appointed cotton agents.

¹⁷² Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 180.

These caused Severance to dread the coming management restructuring, fearing it would just be more of the same. The Experiment was not going well.

Origins Of Hunter's Enlistment

It would be just a few hours later when they woke up, that Severance and others were informed about why the military was out in force the night before. The reason, to them and others was, "a very sudden move, and no one pretends to understand it." What was it? "Gen[eral] Hunter has ordered that all able bodied blacks between 18 and 45 be taken to Hilton Head and enlisted. A draft, in fact." Severance would record that he saw "all day they were being taken in gangs." These groups ranged from 20 to several hundred. As soldiers rounded up these men, news spread out to plantations, creeks, and anywhere else the over male contrabands could be found before the army reached each location. Before going further on this event, it is best to take a step back to see what led to this enlistment, or as Severance called it, a draft.¹⁷³

Dr. Kevin Dougherty from The Citadel observed in his work, *The Port Royal Experiment: A Case Study in Development*, that Hunter, as Military Governor of the Department of the South, found himself commanding a department that was gradually expanding in size. As more ports and coastal areas were occupied, especially in Florida, he had about 18,000 men. These 18,000 men were to occupy a "strip of coastal islands...about twenty miles south from Charleston to the vicinity of Savannah as well as some isolated coastal point in Georgia and northeast Florida." With all this land to hold onto and govern, with more being added as the war progressed, Hunter "probably had the distinction of the most thinly dispersed body of troops over the largest geographic area in the war." Hunter could only hope to maintain a defensive approach, while expected to be on the offensive to help in the occupations of Charleston and

¹⁷³ Severance Journal, May 12, 1862, 31.

Savannah. According to Dougherty, the manpower these able-bodied contrabands offered gave Hunter the solution to his problems. In early April, Hunter set in motion his plan to add these men to his ranks as he requested 50,000 muskets from the War Department. He also requested for authority to arm “loyal men as I can find in the country,” so that “they can be used advantageously against the enemy.” Without waiting for Secretary of War Stanton’s response, Hunter enlisted a local black preacher, Abram Murchison, to circuit around the islands signing up all those who wanted to take up arms. By mid-April, he had a list of 150 men and saw hope for his enlistment.¹⁷⁴

Yet, it was more than just military necessity. Hunter was an abolitionist, and one that, according to Commodore Samuel DuPont, was “very frank” about his convictions, “very independent in thought and action.” Hunter was not a run of the mill abolitionist; he was a firm believer and knew his position as both a military officer and a military governor, allowed him to be on the battlefield, physically and morally, on behalf of the enslaved.¹⁷⁵ Hunter had used other men beside Murchison to help get a feel for how well his enlistment would be received and accomplished. Specifically the contraband-Sergeant Jim Cashman who joined Hunter and became a recruiter, who chose to enlist “For Liberty.” Hunter knew that if he could enlist trusted preachers and fellow contrabands to act as recruiters, his chances for a positive reception would be higher than white civilians or military personnel doing the recruiting. In the end, Dougherty argues, Hunter was exceeding authority all around. As military governor, specifically ordered by

¹⁷⁴ Kevin Dougherty, *The Port Royal Experiment: A Case Study in Development* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2014), 77-78; United States. 1880. *The War of the Rebellion: a compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate armies*. Washington: G.P.O., Ser. I, vol. 6 263-264, Ser. 3, vol. 2 292.

¹⁷⁵ Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 144-145, quoting from letter, Mrs. Samuel Francis DuPont to Henry Winter Davis, May 21, 1862, quoting from an earlier letter addressed to Mrs. DuPont from her husband the Commodore. The Samuel Francis DuPont Papers at the Eleutherian Mills Historical Society.

the War Department, he was to only arm the contrabands in cases of emergency. He had no right to enroll men into the armed forces.¹⁷⁶

Even with the request for arms, at least two men helping in the recruitment, and having a list of at least 150 men wanting to enlist, things were not going all that well for his enlistment scheme. As noted earlier in the chapter, Severance, through some observations and conversations he did not leave with us, concluded that generally the able bodied men did not want to fight; they wanted to be with their families. Laura Towne recorded in her diary that the contrabands around Coffin's Point figured Hunter's plan was "a trap to get to get the able bodied and send them to Cuba to sell" and that, "they are not at all anxious to be soldiers." This idea about Cuba was not some spur of the moment fantasy that came upon the contrabands. Last November, when Union forces came to Port Royal and launched their attack, the planters of the Sea Islands had told their slaves to escape with them. They tried frightening these people by claiming that the Union cared not to free them, but to send them to Cuba for profit, and that the slaves would be better off staying with their masters. Then, the slaves brushed off the scare tactics. Now it was May, about 6 months later, and they started to believe what the masters had told them. This fear, this distrust amongst the majority of the black population, would harm Hunter's plans and the Experiment. The North could not afford these fears and feelings of distrust to take root.¹⁷⁷

Even though it was recorded by many a few days after the fact, Hunter on May 9 issued an emancipation proclamation that declared all slaves within the Department of the South were now free. He issued this before he went forward with his enlistment in hopes it would generate more desire from those he sought to enlist—and he had no authority to do so. Just like when he

¹⁷⁶ Dougherty, *Port Royal Experiment*, 78.

¹⁷⁷ Rupert Sargent Holland, ed., *Letters and Diary of Laura Towne: Written in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862-1884* (Salem MA: Higginson Book Company, 1912), May 5, 1862, 37.

had no authority to arm them for enrollment's sake.¹⁷⁸ Regardless of this fact, Willie Lee Rose, in her research, found that many of the abolitionists in Port Royal were in a state of "jubilation", seeing this proclamation as another bold step forward to end slavery. In the North, Rose writes, Massachusetts Governor, John Andrew, urged Lincoln to not just simply accept Hunter's proclamation, but to take it further nationally. In *Letters from Port Royal*, an individual simply referred to as "H.W.,"¹⁷⁹ wrote in her diary of being told about the Hunter Proclamation and was confused since they heard nothing from Northern papers or from anyone else prior to May 9. She believed that these able-bodied men being called to enlist to help fulfill this emancipation proclamation were "well contented here, and most of them will stay..." Although some people in the Sea Islands and in the North were celebrating this act of Hunter's, H.W. was one of a few who remained cautious.¹⁸⁰

Hunter's Enlistment As Recorded By Published Sources

Then May 12 came and the islands witnessed Hunter going through with his plan. Before going into what Severance recorded, a look at what others recorded, whose papers have been

¹⁷⁸ Hunter was not the first officer to exceed their authority and free the slaves within their department. Major General John C. Fremont was the military-governor of the Department of the West, which contained the border state of Missouri. On August 30, 1861, he placed Missouri under martial law and declared all slaves within the state to be free. He did so in hopes of taking the wind out of the sails of the state's secessionists, who were participating in guerilla warfare against unionists in Missouri's own mini-civil war. His emancipation order was overruled by President Abraham Lincoln in September and removed Fremont and transferred him to the Mountain Department (modern-day West Virginia). Lincoln had feared this independent action by Fremont would drive the unionists of the four Border States to the Confederacy and thus lose those four states to the South. For more on Fremont's Emancipation see, Allan C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

¹⁷⁹ In the introduction to *Letters from Port Royal*, editors make note that many individuals, such as this "H.W.", found within these collected letters and diary entries had not left their full names. What they could conclude was that "H.W." was the sister a "C.P.W."

¹⁸⁰ Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 146, 149; Elizabeth Pearson Ware *Letters from Port Royal-Written at the Time of the Civil War: 1862-1868* (Lexington KY: Qontro Publishing, 1906), 30.

relied on for years, will give an idea of what has known by historians. Following that up with Severance will show what they, historians, have missed out on regarding the recruitment effort.

Laura Towne recorded it best. After writing down the date, she added a title for May 12 before recording what happened: “The Black Day.” Towne spent a number of pages relating this day’s events and brought it up again on succeeding days. Word came to the Coffin’s Point area from General Isaac Stevens that all able-bodied men were to report to Hilton Head under orders from Hunter. Towne stated that Edward Pierce was “alarmed and indignant” and confronted Stevens. Stevens confided to Pierce that beyond the orders, he himself knew nothing else really about Hunter’s plans and that personally he thought the orders to be “very ill-advised.” Interestingly, Hunter ordered his troops to go about securing all abled bodied men during “the moonlight” and it was observed that the soldiers “marched silently.” Added to this, Towne and others were ordered to stay silent about this, to let situation go “unexplained to the negroes...we were not to speak of it to-night, lest the negroes should take to the woods.” The acts of soldiers coming in silently in the night and having abolitionists and educators knowingly keep the contrabands uninformed were harmful ones for the Experiment. Stevens headed to where Towne was watching the soldiers, after his confrontation with Pierce, and confessed that this “was dirty work and that he would resign his commission before he would do it again.” While confessing, he ordered the men who were on the plantation Towne was residing in to go with the army to Hilton Head. Towne observed that these able-bodied men had gathered around with “distrust or dismay or else quite watching on their faces.” Making the situation more delicate, two soldiers were seen “loading their guns noisily.”¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ *Laura Towne*, May 11, 1862, 41-44.

As men were being ordered from their homes, Towne came upon women, apparently wives and mothers, mourning and crying. Some of them feared that the soldiers were going to kill them. Other professed that the faith they had in the coming of the Union forces was becoming shaky. As she tried to reassure these women that no killings or beatings will fall upon them and that they should pray with her and keep the faith, she also tried consoling the men. Consoling them to the fact that Hunter promised freedom to all men who enlisted, and that after their time as soldiers, they could return as men who were truly free. However, these men sorrowfully left their families. Seeing the state of the men, Towne said her “blood boil[ed] to see such arbitrary proceedings and I ached...” As men marched off and women cried, Towne thought, “How they could see their able-bodied men carried away so by force when they were all last night in terror of their master’s return, they are like lambs left without dogs when their were wolves about.” It is striking that she would compare the fear of their masters returning by night to having their husbands and sons marched off by force by their supposed liberators. Fears of an enemy returning were played out by the terror caused by friends. The women would cry and mourn the rest of the day. Agitated, Towne in anger wrote, “How rash General Hunter to risk the danger of resistance on their part, and how entirely unprotected he leaves us!” This was the first time Towne feared physical resistance from the contrabands, something Severance feared for over a month. It is telling that Towne believed that despite these men being enlisted to fight, their absence from the area had left them a feeling of insecurity; an irony not lost on her and most likely others.¹⁸²

During this time, the contrabands took to the woods and were literally “hunted out by the soldiers,” when before they had been patient and trusting of these same soldiers. As Stevens

¹⁸² Ibid., 43-45.

bemoaned the application of Hunter's orders, the same soldiers were grumbling. They were not given food to sustain themselves in this recruitment process; something a soldier said was "a repulsive duty." Towne was told that Hunter himself was trying to calm the coming recruits that they were not being forced into anything and will be given papers declaring their freedom. However, Towne ended the day's events with: "I know that General H[unter] is not trying for freedom." To her, this open and active abolitionist was acting as the antithesis. According to her count, over 400 men from the area in and around Coffin's Point went to Hilton Head that day.¹⁸³ No one was happy, as seen from Towne's accounts. Even Hunter realized his plan was failing and was trying to compensate as much as he could to save face.

From May 13-19, Towne wrote mostly about Hunter's enlistment. Many times she referred to how efforts were made to reassure the women that their men were not going to Cuba. For days women were sullen, hoping they will see their men again. Reports circulated, mostly through General Stevens' efforts, that Hunter was indeed still a friend of the contrabands and that he was not forcing men to enlist, just that he merely wanted to see them. Despite these efforts of reassurance, Towne and others were still agitated: "This piece of tyranny carried dismay into this household, and we were in great indignation to think of the alarm and grief this would cause among the poor negroes..." She repeated how she detested the sending of soldiers, no matter how noble they tried acting, in the middle of the night, taking people from their homes, from fields and during their breakfast meals. She recapped how Stevens would resign before doing this again, how alarmed the men were, and how they wanted to flee from the area. She spoke of more promises that men would return, that no one would be killed, but she hoped the men on Hilton Head would be safe. In trying to find a silver lining, Towne and others spoke to the

¹⁸³ Ibid., 46-47.

female contrabands how their men being armed would help “keep off ‘Secests,’” and the men would return soon. She observed some soldiers and civilians had given some of the men half-dollars hoping that would brighten their day. Towne also wondered if this whole scheme of Hunter’s was really “from one of the gentleman of the Association¹⁸⁴ who went to see him.” Towne was the only one to have this theory of an outsider being the brains of the enlistment. This theory also included the idea that “persons in charge of the plantations were so eager for the cotton crop that they prevented the negroes from enlisting, or induced them not to.” And in order to supersede the actions of these people, this unnamed Association member advised Hunter with the enlistment idea to see if these able-bodied men “were cowards, or why they did not eagerly take the chance of becoming self-defenders.” It was apparent that this single day, May 12, was having a permanent effect on the Experiment. Towne, as seen above, was thinking along the lines of Severance: that the Experiment was being run in a tyrannical, slavery-like manner. Towne, who earlier in this chapter and in the last chapter had been able to find so much hope and positive aspects when confronted with failings, seemed now to recognize her optimism was now waning.¹⁸⁵

In *Letters From Port Royal*, Elizabeth Ware Pearson wrote on the May 11, that Philbrick was informed last night by Pierce that Hunter had issued orders for “all the agents [Philbrick included] to send him [Hunter] in the morning all the able-bodied black men between the ages of 18 and 45, capable of bearing arms, on the plantations.” Philbrick, it will be recalled, came in March 1862 originally as an educator. Upon arriving to the Sea Islands, he became to a Superintendent instead in order to endeavor in his own business venture with cotton. Since

¹⁸⁴ It is not clear of which Association she speaks of for there were two operating in Port Royal: The American Missionary Association and the National Freedmen’s Relief Association.

¹⁸⁵ *Laura Towne*, May 13-19, 1862, 47-54.

Philbrick was working on various plantations, he was to be one of these agents to grab all the able-bodied men for the enlistment. He being with Treasury, meant that all Special Treasury Agents were doing as he was ordered to do. What is interesting is that Severance never mentioned that he was out grabbing these men from the fields to be taken to the enlistment. This was because he was still with the Commissary, not the plantations, so he was exempt. However, it can be surmised that Thorpe, Park, and Sumner had to do this work that most likely had them “suffering,” as Pearson recorded Philbrick was feeling about these orders.¹⁸⁶ Once again, Agents must have felt like the “nigger-driver,” compelling men rather than helping them become free.

Ware continues: “There was no explanation for whatsoever of the reasons for the demand [agents to gather able-bodied men], no hint of what was to be done with them, and nothing but our confidence in General Hunter’s friendliness to the race gave us a shadow of comfort.” They were kept in the dark alongside Towne and Severance about the situation. Pearson also confirmed that soldiers had come “in the night” and had set out in plantations and woods to keep the men they were after from fleeing into the woods. Pearson admitted that she and others had barely been in bed when knocks came at their doors and others nearby; knocks that were “echoing...with a ghostly sound.” After speaking to Stevens and seeing men marched off, Ware and her companions could not eat, for they felt “wretched,” and felt bad for the soldiers as they were completing a “heart-sickening work.” Later in the day, Philbrick reported his completion of Hunter’s orders. With no fanfare over what he did, Philbrick related how he gathered the men and told who was to go to Hilton Head. Philbrick and others relating their jobs to recruit the workers, reported that many “were not averse to trying their hands at life in the world,” especially after being regaled by the soldiers about pay and food. However, most of them made

¹⁸⁶ *Letters from Port Royal*, 25.

known what they “dread is being made to fight,” and “afraid of being made to fight.” Those marching off, told their women that because of this they “did not trust many white people” any longer, but maintained trust in those like Philbrick who had come to talk to them, rather than compel them instantly to Hilton Head. Once again, that trust Severance and others in April sought to help the contrabands regain was being lost again.¹⁸⁷

Willie Lee Rose in her monumental work, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, records the reactions of others throughout the Islands. A Susan Walker admitted that these contrabands had been brave for escaping their masters, but they had no desire to leave home and go and fight their masters. Samuel Phillips, a Superintendent, also recorded in a letter (as found in Rose’s work), how the women and children were loud in their lamenting as the men left for Hilton Head. Some of the missionaries “resented Hunter’s draft “ because of the way it was managed and felt that this draft frustrated their plans of helping the contrabands “demonstrate their capacity for freedom.”¹⁸⁸

What we read of Severance’s reactions below, there were many similarities with Towne, Ware, and Philbrick. Dismay and outrage over the method of carrying out the enlistment; comparing it to tyranny; sympathy toward the fleeing men, mourning women, and being confused since he was too kept in the dark. However, there were instances that were different, more foreboding. He believed that the move to enlist was really a new form of slavery and had little faith in Hunter’s emancipation proclamation. He had less faith in Hunter himself than the others. And he was the only that wished the enlistment was not just done in a different way, but done when cotton would not be ruined because of the absent laborers. He had no care for the cotton; he just saw a glaring contradiction. The government demanded cotton production, but

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 26.

¹⁸⁸ Rose, *Rehearsal For Reconstruction*, 144-148.

then turning around and making moves that would ruin it. He wanted consistency. His most damning reaction was comparing the move and Agents as slave driving. No other person at Port Royal made such bold denouncements.

Hunter's Enlistment As Recorded By Severance

To begin his account, he made a stunning confession. He wrote that he wasn't even aware of the proclamation until *after* learning about the soldiers enforcing Hunter's enlistment orders.¹⁸⁹ “[W]e learn another fact—that yesterday at dress parade an order was read, declaring that all the colored people in S.C., Georgia, and Florida, are forever free!” As a child of abolitionist parents, Severance should be thrilled, however, similar to H.W., he was cautious. “How that is to alter their treatment, if at all, I can't tell, but I really think they are not many removed from Slavery now.” Even compared to what was shared by Towne, Stevens, Philbrick, and Ware, this was both a pessimistic and damning reaction to this emancipation proclamation! To this point, upon hearing the proclamation, Severance recalled all that he had heard and witnessed since his arrival in Port Royal. He had little to say in the way of optimism or satisfaction that the Experiment was bringing the 10,000 slaves out of their enslavement. Having recalled the past month, he felt that despite the proclamation, these people are still enslaved and that what Hunter had declared was simply words, no substance. Then after this unflattering verdict, he tried to be optimistic, but what he said next gives the modern reader a feeling of persistent worrying: “That is a step, at any rate, and Hunter is going to do something. I hope, besides proclaim.” This was hardly a stirring endorsement.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ As evidenced above, Laura Towne, Elizabeth Pearson Ware, Edward Pierce and Edward Philbrick all heard about the coming proclamation. There was no explanation as to why Severance, at least, was not made aware of it in some way.

¹⁹⁰ Severance Journal, May 12, 1862, 31-32. Emphasis his.

What Severance left for us regarding the enlistment, was on par with what those like Towne and Ware left for us. There were many similarities to what they felt, heard, and saw. However, he was able to add in a few details and reactions not left by others. “We learn this morning...of the cause of last night’s turnout of military. Gen. Hunter has ordered that all able bodied blacks between 18 and 45 be taken to Hilton Head to be enlisted. A draft, in fact.” Seeing that they were “being taken in gangs” all day, he noticed groups of men were marched in various groups (ranging from 20 to “several hundred”). Severance was told by a Sergeant how some of the people were reacting that upon arrival at a plantation, “women made a great ado, and some one carried the news to another place just over a creek; and then went there, lo!, every man had taken to the woods!” Later, Severance spoke with Edward Pierce and Frederick Eustis, both men “decidedly confounded.” Pierce went to both Stevens and Hunter, and was told by the latter that he would allow “the driver and one ploughman to remain on each place,” in a sort of early compromise as Pierce was worried about all the workers being taken from the fields.¹⁹¹

An individual simply referred to as “Burton,” who was probably an agent-superintendent, and others, according to Severance, “have been among them [the workers] to-day,” and “say the women are greatly troubled, and cannot be made to see that them are not taken to be sent into battle and shot at once.” Here it was interesting that these women Severance was hearing about thought that their men were to be taken to be shot and killed, nothing more. While Towne recorded that women thought they themselves were going to be killed, here the women had that fear for their men only. This dread went further: “At first they naturally thought it was some cruel plan of outs to force them to fight, and sue them for targets, to save the whites.” Severance even conceded “the mode and abruptness would in some measure justify this belief.” After

¹⁹¹ Ibid., May 12, 1862, 31.

some time, they were able to help some of the women “see their folly, but it is very hard.”

Comparable to what the other primary sources recorded, Severance confirmed that, “there have been some trying scenes.” One had “men being taken from the fields, without going home or getting breakfast even.” Another contained, “[o]ne woman has been crying all day, and is sure she will never see her husband again.” As for the rumors concerning Cuba, a few days later, a black gentleman came to the plantation that Frederick Eustis was over. This man had been taken by his master two years earlier, leaving a wife, a sister, and three children. This man related to Severance how he had escaped from the mainland on the same day of Hunter’s enlistment. He also told Severance that while on the mainland, he was told by “white men” that the Union was “whipped and don’t see why they don’t give up.” They also tried striking fear into him and others by saying that the “Yankees” would have them “sold to Cuba” if they came across him and the other slaves. Until their being sold, they would only be fed with “a pint of water and a cracker a day!” Regardless of these threats, this runaway slave “believed in the Yankees.”¹⁹²

Later in the day, Severance was able to learn more about what would happen to these men, whose abrupt “draft” had caused these “trying scenes.” After arriving to Hilton Head, they would remain there a “short time, receive free papers, and then be allowed to enlist or return, as they choose.” He believed that those “younger and abler ones” would be in a way seduced by the food, clothing, and pay the military offered and would, “doubtless remain.” Yet, those “with large families or who are not strong will return.” As for some of those agent-superintendents, tasked with picking these able-bodied men from their plantations, many “are quite sure of their men, if the chose is given them” to enlist, but Severance was, “not so sure of that.”¹⁹³

¹⁹² Ibid., Severance Journal, May 16, 1862. 35.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 32.

In some way validated, Severance on May 15 came across “about 50 negroes” that passed him by on the road, heading for home after a stint on Hilton Head. He was told that there were about “800 there,” who “have been picked out, so it would seem that they are not yet free to come away [from the Hilton Head].” Underscoring “picked out” was another example of Severance truly feeling that the contraband population was really not saved from their enslavement. This enlistment showed that reality since, as they would at auctions, be “picked out” for a work and possible shipment they knew nothing about—all because they were young, fit, and able. A silver lining of a sort was expressed to Severance, when some of these 80 men reported that most had left Hilton Head because of physical disabilities, and others professed that “they would have stayed [at Hilton Head] at once, if they had been able.” There were a few men, as Severance and others believed, who wanted to fight or simply enjoyed seeing what food, clothing, and pay they’d been given if they enlisted. According to Towne’s account from Marcus, a contraband drafted May 12, admitted that he was eager to “serve in the forts,” but did “not wish to fight, but only to learn to fight...” But this still did not take away from the fact that Severance and others were shocked, even disgusted, by the enlistment and how it was carried out.¹⁹⁴

“Besides, he takes the laborers from the field and leave the growing crop to waste,” something the women alone cannot take care of with the men now gone. “This Mr. Pierce stated forcibly to General Hunter, and he [Hunter] admitted he had not thought of that.” This incident, recorded by Laura Towne, was to be another fateful consequence of the enlistment. Hunter

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., May 15, 1862, 33-34; *Laura Towne*, May 19, 1862, 54.

admitted he had not taken into consideration what would happen to the cotton when dreaming out his emancipation and future all-black regiments.¹⁹⁵

Hunter, according to what Severance left for us, compromised by leaving two men, those who were drivers and ploughmen. However, this would not solve the problem of cotton fields, now largely left without manpower. How were they expected to keep up the cotton planting and harvesting for the government, if the government was taking away the means to do so?

Severance, on the 13th of May, wrote of a visit he received from Arthur Sumner, where they discussed the enlistment and the effect it had on cotton. Sumner was “much troubled, and so are others, about the effects of this sudden movement. There are not enough left to cultivate the cotton that has been planted, and what is to be done?” They did agree that had this “move, without the sudden and tyrannical-looking seizure, could only be approved at any other time, it would seem to be anything but politic now, or profitable; or consistent after Gov[ernmen]t has done and expended so much to get all this cotton into the ground, to take away the laborers.” It was just about universal that Hunter’s methods to enact his enlistment were tyrannical. They also had to agree that Hunter must have had some power to do this enlistment (they were not aware he had no authority to do so), and hoped, “it come out for the best.”¹⁹⁶

However, this hope was dashed somewhat, when Severance was visited by Eustis, after the latter spent the last couple of days with Pierce and Hunter. Pierce had written a letter to Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, detailing the “whole affair, and the letters and visits to Hunter,” who, “evidently had made up his mind and his Course, and was not to be moved.” Hunter also confessed to Pierce that he knew his plans “conflicted with the Treas. Dept.’s but

¹⁹⁵ *Laura Towne*, May 19, 1862, 55.

¹⁹⁶ *Severance Journal*, May 13, 1862, 32.

could not help it if two plans of the Govt. conflicted[sic].” Here Severance added, “(Does this imply that his own was by order of the [War] Dept. or the [Lincoln] Cabinet?)”¹⁹⁷ Again, not only was Severance not aware that Hunter had neither authority nor approval from Stanton and the War Department, but had no such approval from Lincoln either (he also did not know of General Fremont’s similar move the year before). This insertion of his thoughts regarding what Eustis was telling him, again revealed the confusion and contradictions resulting from two departments trying to run this singular experiment. The need for confining authority to one department was now even more evident. Continuing, Eustis claimed that, “Pierce admits his approval of the principle of the movement, but shows its disastrous effect in this case [the cotton],” and asked Hunter, ““What is to become of the 5000 acres of cotton in the ground, some already up?’ And answers ‘Dry up!’” Hunter agreed with the islands 10,000 contrabands that he too had no love for the cotton and told Pierce that the cotton would and should dry up in an emotionless, matter-of-fact, response.¹⁹⁸

The results to Hunter’s efforts were best captured in two different instances. First, Philbrick returned from Hilton Head to Coffin’s Point and told Elizabeth Pearson Ware and others, that Hunter admitted, “that the negroes misapprehended his wishes and ideas, and he could not raise as many as he wanted,” and could only give them “an idea of the life and drill and after a few weeks not retain any who wished to return to their homes.” Hunter’s dreams of all black regiments did not pan out during May 1862. Rose summed up the second instance best in

¹⁹⁷ Something to point out is that Severance, or any of his family members, for whatever reason, do not mention that Lincoln rescinded Hunter’s emancipation proclamation a few weeks later and demanded an apology from Hunter. Like with Fremont, Lincoln feared this premature action by Hunter would endanger Lincoln’s strategy to keep the Border States away from the Confederacy. For more on Lincoln’s action see, Ira Berlin, *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* (New York: The New Press, 1992), 46-48; Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction* 150-152.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Rehearsal for Reconstruction: “In the government view, the organization simply did not exist.”

For Lincoln and his administration as a whole, these “regiments” Hunter tried forming were ignored and brushed off since they were formed without their approval. Their rejection to accept them officially ended their “creation.”¹⁹⁹

Severance’s Wishes For The Experiment And Its Fate

A week after the “movement,” as Severance referred to the enlistment often, the people, white and black, were still debating the merits of the enlistment and the need for cotton. At a sermon of Reverend French’s, where a majority in attendance were contrabands, French spoke about Hunter’s order, the character of the “Colored people,” how he wished more had enlisted, and that the progress of the contrabands was both rapid and strong. Towards the end, he spent a lot of time, or as Severance phrased it, “[h]e up this pretty strongly—so much so,” about the need of the people to bear “cheerfully whatever hardship might be brought upon them, patient and confident of ultimate success.” An old man, a contraband, stood up to interrupt French. Recorded in Severance’s attempt to imitate the Gullah dialect, the old man cried out: ““No man hab sense who say dat. Why; if my ole massa come back do ye ‘spose I’d tuk my hoe and work cotton fer him—no! ‘deed I wouldn’t—I’d lef’ him. I wouldn’t stay wid him—I ain’t gwine to work fer no man, ‘cept I choose! No man talk sense who say dat!”” This old man spoke for these people.

They were tired being told to work for this person and that person, tired of being told to be

¹⁹⁹ *Letters from Port Royal* May 11, 1862, 27; Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 147. But this would not be the end to the idea of all-black regiments. Although Hunter was not able to form two regiments, as desire, he was able to form a regiment, barely. He called them the 1st South Carolina, even if the Washington, D.C. refused to acknowledge their existence. Hunter, and others such as Saxton, would begin to communicate the idea of black regiments with Stanton following the failed enlistment, and would continue to push Stanton approve their organizations well into the summer. When Congress passed the Second Confiscation Act in July 17, 1862, which freed slaves found in Union-occupied areas after masters were given 60 days notice, Saxton was finally empowered to create Hunter’s long hoped for regiments. Soon, the 1st South Carolina was officially recognized and the 2nd South Carolina was created. By the end of the Civil War, about 180,000 black men joined the Union Army. Early units such as the two South Carolina ones, the 54th Massachusetts and the Corps d’Afrique would help form what would total over 175 United States Colored Troops (USCT) regiments.

patient and bear all hardships with a smile on their faces. They wanted to be free and chose their work and whom to work for. Severance agreed with the old man. He started his thoughts on what was said by saying that, [t]he negroes have become too free here, in many respects!,” and that they have been “refusing to work without pay and outfit is small and uncertain.” Despite this preamble, he asserted, “[h]ow can one blame them for preferring to change, and become independent.”²⁰⁰

The next paragraph after recounting the interrupted sermon, Severance made his own statement out of frustration for the people. “The cotton may all go to ruin, much of it—or some, at least—undoubtedly will; and it [would] be for the political and commercial interest to keep every man at work on cotton and to compel them to do that.” However, “these people can’t understand the reasons for such necessity, and think they have a right to do as they please, being free, as they believe and are told.” As for his employment, “I can’t see the material difference between an Overseer and an [Superintendent] where Slave-driving²⁰¹ is the business.” Then he lamented, “[i]f a system of wages were only adopted a willingness to work would certainly manifest itself. But what paltry return do these people get for their labor, and how uncertain it is!” Politically and economically, Severance was aware that he and other agents had to keep the people working on the cotton fields, especially if they wanted to keep more cotton from being ruined (one result of the enlistment). Yet, how would he teach these people of these two necessities, when, these people believed what they had been told for over 6 months: that they were now free. This contradiction of forcing people to work but telling them they were free brought to the conclusion for Severance that he and others was simply slave driving. Their work

²⁰⁰ Severance Journal, May 18, 1862, 37-38.

²⁰¹ Emphasis his.

for the Experiment was no different that the antebellum plantation overseer. Even the crop they were driving people to work on was the same! The need for cotton was ruining the people and the Experiment.²⁰²

This outburst was a culminating one, from over a month of frustrations and vexations. This outburst was a build up of what he said about cotton and his employer the day after Hunter's enlistment. "I wish all the cotton could be thrown overboard by the Govt. with credit to itself and the world—not credit, for it must be credit, but with no fear of the result." For Severance, a Special Treasury Agent, to have such a wish was bold indeed! He was tired of the cotton and the constant need for it, as the contrabands were. Severance now felt that the government and the Experiment would be redeemed in the eyes of the contrabands and the world if they would just end the addiction to cotton. An addiction that was causing Severance and others to feel as if they were just a new brand of slave-drivers, bringing no change to a people; something that pained this abolitionist-raised young man.²⁰³

Severance was not alone. Towne admitted her annoyances over the need of cotton and how that need impacted the laborers. "The people of these islands, whom Government does not ration (because there is no corn) had nothing but hominy to eat, were naked, were put to work at cotton, *which they hated*²⁰⁴, as being nothing in their own pockets and all profit to the superintendent, who they could not be sure were not only another set of cotton agents or cotton planters; and so discontent and trouble arose." Again, it was evident that the people cared not for cotton and thought those agents-superintendents were only here for the profit of cotton. The

²⁰² Severance Journal, May 18, 1862, 38.

²⁰³ Severance Journal, May 13, 1862, 32.

²⁰⁴ Emphasis his.

contrabands only saw that they gained nothing from being forced back to the cotton fields and were suffering from broken government promises, that, as Towne noted, “discontent and trouble arose.” In other words, resistance was brewing.²⁰⁵

The Coming Of General Rufus Saxton And Hopes For His Role

So great and lasting were the impacts of cotton and what Hunter had done, that as General Rufus Saxton arrived and prepared to take his new position in the islands, people all around were concerned that he would maintain the status quo. There where those, however, that felt Saxton would be for the best. Reverend French avowed to Laura Towne that, “General Saxton will be our friend, and that we shall have the military in our favor instead of against us.” It will be recalled that Saxton was also an abolitionist, raised by an abolitionist family, like Severance. Saxton’s superiors, inferiors, and civilians held him in high regard.²⁰⁶

Even with Saxton’s well-known background and French’s praise of Saxton, there were some in Port Royal who needed to be assured further as they anticipated his arrival. Riding with Edward Pierce, Severance sought such assurance. “I asked him if Gen[eral] Saxton would make any material change in the arrangement of matters here,” to which Pierce answered that, “he thought not; in fact Gen. S[axton] had written that he should let things go on as before.” Most likely bothered by that, Severance asked if Saxton was, “Sound on the goose.” Pierce answered: “Yes, he is a strong Anti-Slavery man.” The next part of the conversation centered on authority, where they mused on the fact that Saxton was a “Brig[adier] Gen[eral] without a brigade; and

²⁰⁵ *Laura Towne*, May 23, 1862, 60. Emphasis mine. What should be noted here was the belief of corrupt superintendents, acting much like the troublesome military-appointed cotton agents that had been a thorn since the end of 1861. This feeling of corrupt agents as recorded by Towne, was one of some instances, such as one found in Ludwell Johnson’s *Red River Campaign* (1958), which fueled Reconstruction’s early historiographical belief that all Treasury Agents were corrupt. So far in this thesis, it was evident that there were many good people with good-intentions employed as Treasury Agents during the Experiment and wartime Reconstruction.

²⁰⁶ *Laura Towne*, May 19, 1862, 55; Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 153-154.

couldn't say whether he was to be titled as Military Governor." They were not certain as to what powers Saxton would be granted by presuming he would "be rather free" with the use of his power. Something Lincoln "countenanced," or, accepted by inference, but Chase was more reluctant to allow. Severance and Pierce did agree that this was, "a move," a "step forward." When Pierce mentioned that the appointment of Saxton was a "step forward," Severance was still was not sure. "Of course that is a move, --to have Govt. take the thing in hand, relieving private benevolence—if Govt. only will keep moving, and not make political capital or financial speculation out of it." Though milder to what he boldly asserted earlier by wanting the government out of the cotton business, here he sarcastically remarked that the government was taking the work out of private groups and was unfortunately profiting from their interference financially and politically. Of which profit, Severance wished they would not seek such "speculation" and profit, but should do this work for moral benefit, nothing public to flaunt.²⁰⁷

Continuing his hunt for assurances that things would go better under Saxton, Severance grew more worrisome. The day after his conversation with Pierce, Eustis told him a grand and unfortunate story. Eustis informed Severance about the "Sprague affair," which had occurred in the end of March, but the news was barely reaching the people in Port Royal. Colonel William Reynolds, the same officer appointed to be in charge, temporarily, of the cotton production due to both his background in the trade and Rhode Island Governor William Sprague's (Reynolds was from the same state) familial connection to Secretary Chase. It has been discussed earlier in this chapter and in the last two chapters, of the conflicts between Reynolds and his cotton agents with Pierce. A part of Reynolds's responsibilities was to ship cotton and other "movables," such as furniture, up north for sale. In completing this assignment, Reynolds and his agents had set up

²⁰⁷ Severance Journal, May 17, 1862, 37.

a system where they would skim from the profit certain percentages of these “movables.” However, it was unearthed that what Reynolds recorded in account books did not match the realities. He and his agents embarrassed Chase when it was uncovered they were pocketing hundreds from the government and tried hiding it. Worse, some of these “movables” and the profit garnered from their sales were traded with Confederate agents. Hearing this, Severance wrote: “If Saxton should allow himself to be moved he would throw the whole thing into disrepute, if nothing more.” If Saxton, whose integrity was certain, should “move” or tarnish his reputation by acting as Reynolds had, Severance mourned that the moral standing of the Experiment would be lost.²⁰⁸

Eustis then reminded Severance that the cotton agents were delaying their departure from the area. The cotton agents delayed their departure because they were hoping that under Saxton there would be “some hope of positions under the new state of affairs.” Severance and Eustis feared that if these new positions were to be secured by these troublesome agents, since “Gov. S[prague] has his finger in the pie we may despair of all further progress, at least as the main object.” Both were hoping that Massachusetts-born Saxton would in cahoots with the Rhode Island governor. Coining the 1855 phrase of David Christy’s that became the motto of the antebellum South when South Carolina Senator James H. Hammond used it in 1858 in a speech before Congress, Severance grieved that even in Union occupied Port Royal, “Cotton is King still, to all practical purposes.” And because this crop still ruled in both South and North, and in the pockets of people from within, “it remains to be seen whether the new ‘Military Governor’ is to be a mere tool or an independent man.” With the news of the “Sprague Affair,” Severance was now further away from being assured about Saxton. In late May, Severance would say that,

²⁰⁸ Ibid., May 18, 1862, 38.

“What a fuss about that man!” as people were “waiting impatiently for the arrival of General Saxton.” It would take seeing Saxton at work for Severance to determine finally if this man was truly the man whose praises were raised would fix, even save, the Experiment.²⁰⁹

Severance Enters Superintendent Work

While all this drama and fear of a doomed experiment raged between May 11 and 20, Severance was finally given the opportunity to work as a superintendent of plantations, and the timing could not have been worse. In fact Pierce, via letter, wanted him “to take a change of places with Thorpe,” so that the latter could rest and “come here [Eustis’s plantation on Ladies Island] for a while.” Initially, Severance was shocked at the request because, “[t]he worse reputation of any have Park & Thorpe’s places, and to put me into such a post—what is Pierce thinking of?” Thorpe and Park had for two months now suffered resistance, mainly passive, from their laborers who were tired of the broken promises heaped upon them. This resistance forced these two men to have to really become the “nigger-driver” and babysit their laborers all day, everyday, to ensure quotes for cotton planting were met. Of the two, Thorpe was so worried about the situation that he had gotten himself sick. Pierce even said to Severance that, ““Thorpe is killing himself over there.”” Severance admitted that working at a plantation “knocks out of me the fancy,” he would miss his time at Eustis’s Commissary and vowed that, “I don’t think I should worry myself as much as T[horpe] has done.” It cannot be that Severance assumed he was better and would be better than Thorpe, but that given what he knew now about the work, most of the information from Thorpe himself, Severance was now better prepared than Thorpe had been when tasked with plantation supervision. Although he did not record any, Severance

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 38-39; May 20, 1862, 39; Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 143-144. The “Sprague Affair” would be another notch in the “all Treasury Agents were corrupt” belt of early Reconstruction historiography.

probably had ideas brewing as to how to change the reputation the thirteen plantations under Thorpe and Park had received.²¹⁰

Pierce in person again asked Severance about superintending, to which Severance answered that he would “like it pretty well” and that, “I could try, I didn’t know how I should succeed in this branch.” Further, he confirmed that he would “like it very well, sir.” Why would Severance readily agree to become a superintendent, given what he had learned about the duties of this position during the past two months? He never shared why he did so, however, Edward Pierce saw in Severance a hardworking, levelheaded young man impervious to adversity. Pierce could trust Severance. Strong-minded parents raised Severance and their personalities and work ethics became a part of him. It was not so much that he knew he could do better than Thorpe, but by being prepared as to what could and did go wrong with the job, his awareness would allow him to tackle the problems and solve them. Also, he was a young man, 19 years of age, almost 20, and a Harvard freshman involved in what was most likely his first real job. In being able to partake of any work experience he was able to assume, he was in essence “résumé building” for his future. Pierce then reminded Severance about Thorpe’s condition and also added that his decision for this would be a change for Severance, given that he has been “keeping store and selling things” since he arrived to the Sea Islands. Pierce and Severance also agreed that because Thorpe was “too thoroughly conscientious,” and that, “he worried and gets anxious if every thing doesn’t go just so, and the responsibility bothers him.” It was not so much that being conscientious was a bad thing for Pierce to see in his superintendents, it was that the men, like Thorpe, needed to be stronger in front of adversity and should not get so consumed with perfection that they could not longer work or be useful. Either Pierce was desperate for a

²¹⁰ Severance Journal, May 15, 1862, 33-34.

substitute since he had so few men, or he saw something in Severance that would make him best suited to handle plantations with the “worse reputation.” Pierce’s reasoning about Severance was not recorded. What we do know was that Pierce was very concerned about Thorpe and wanted him to relax; have a vacation of sorts.²¹¹

However, Severance and Arthur Sumner, who was there when Severance got his new “orders,” were concerned. It was made known that Thorpe had his feelings hurt by Pierce’s decision regarding him since “Mr. P[ierce]’s note was not the most considerately worded.” And these hurt feelings, caused Severance to now worry that he would be an instrument of creating ill feelings between Thorpe and himself. For Severance, the whole matter was delicate, and knew Thorpe felt he was a failure for being removed from his duties. There was some good news however. Severance learned that the thirteen plantations had all their cotton harvested and gathered for shipment, so “Pierce had ordered them [superintendents and laborers] to lie off and take an easy time this week,” an order, “they have obeyed.” Severance vowed to let things go as they are and not bother Thorpe so the man could rest.²¹²

Nothing more was said about plantation work for a few days. Severance heard that both Thorpe and Park had come to Pierce asking to return to the plantations. Thorpe was taking “advantage of Mr. P[ierce]’s advice, and had been visiting and lying by all week,” and was feeling better. Because of this, Thorpe told Pierce “the work would be much easier now,” and after some more work, “might go home very soon any way.” Pierce denied Thorpe’s request to return to work, something Severance was pleased with for he had felt it would be “cruel” to have Thorpe come back only after a few days and so soon before his time in the islands were done.

²¹¹ Ibid., 34.

²¹² Ibid., Emphasis his.

Severance even admitted that, “I have got used to it, and don’t mind the dirt and disagreeables so much as a new person would.” This would be, since the hard work was already done.

Interestingly, Severance then added: “Besides, we are all in suspense now, and may be kicked out next week!” He did not expound on this. Did he mean there was the chance, now greater and for some reason not mentioned, that an attack by the Confederacy was imminent and there was no hope of a suitable defense to stay on? Or, did he mean that the resistance of the contrabands still simmered and despite the ordered break, they were planning his feared mutiny? Or, was it something all together innocent? We will never know, but could take the two possible scenarios as either being very likely as this point for the Experiment’s fate.²¹³

The *Planter* Affair

During this time, there was some good and exciting news that had just as great an impact on the Sea Islands as Hunter’s enlistment. This news was also celebrated throughout the North. This news would be very minor when compared to the war as whole, but its impact was psychological for the war effort, the people working for the Experiment, and for the contrabands. A Confederate gunboat, the *CSS Planter*, commandeered by a black crew (drafted to work in the steamship-turned-gunboat by masters), with a Robert Smalls (who was a native of Beaufort, SC, taken to Charleston when 12 years of age by his master)²¹⁴ as the ship’s “captain,” escaped Charleston Harbor toward Northern Blockade ships on May 15.²¹⁵

²¹³ Ibid., May 17, 1862, 37.

²¹⁴ Edward A. Miller Jr., *Gullah Statesman: Robert Small from Slavery to Congress, 1839-1915* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), is an excellent biography on Robert Smalls.

²¹⁵ For purposes of this thesis, only Severance’s writings about Robert Smalls will be discussed. All other primary sources, such as those of Laura Towne and Elizabeth Pearson Ware and Edward Philbrick have similar accounts to Severance’s.

In short, on the night of May 12, Smalls was left in charge of the vessel after the only three white sailors assigned to the ship decided to spend the night on shore. Around 3a.m. on May 13, Smalls, eight other black crewmen and their families (who were snuck aboard during the night) set sail for Charleston Harbor and the Atlantic Ocean. This daring escape was planned out for a number of months beforehand. Sailing by Confederate-occupied Fort Sumter, and other fortifications, Smalls wearing his officers uniform, let loose the memorized whistle-signals to each fortification he passed by. Having duped the watches of each fortification, the *Planter* made it to Union ship and surrendered. Along with the ship as a prize, Smalls was also able to offer the Union a codebook containing the Confederate signals, a map of torpedo emplacements in and around the harbor, and estimated troop strengths in the city and fortifications. Smalls instantly became a hero and celebrity.²¹⁶

Severance recorded that a few days after this incredible coup made by Smalls, “Mr. Eustis told me a wonderful account of an escape of a rebel boat from Charleston, with a crew of nine blacks.” The Steamer with stores, ammunition and “[t]he crew [getting] some of their families on board, left the dock early Tuesday morning, steamed down the harbor, passed Sumter, giving the usual signal, and then made for the blockading fleet.” The *Planter* was later taken to Beaufort, where it was said of the crew that they were “fine fellows,” and declared to an officer of one of the Union ships that it was, “their [the crew] intention to have died before

²¹⁶ Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 149-150. Smalls served in the Union Navy throughout the war, even commanding the *Planter* during coastal actions. After the war, Smalls became both a successful businessman in Beaufort and a Congressman for both South Carolina’s House of Representatives and in the US House of Representatives. After his tenure, he spent the rest of his life as the US Collector of Customs in Beaufort and the director of the black-owned railroad, Enterprise Railroad and helped publish the black-owned newspaper, the *Beaufort Standard*. He died in 1915.

giving up the ship.” After hearing this account Severance announced, “I shall want to meet them, and will if I can get time.”²¹⁷

And meet them, he did. The next he, “[w]ent aboard the Charleston Steamer, and saw the colored crew. Some of them are fine looking fellows, and uncommonly intelligent.” The prize of this visit was being able to speak with Robert Smalls, though Severance referred to him as “the pilot.” After meeting the crew, “[t]he pilot told us his story.” After sharing the story of their escape, which took about a page of Severance’s journal, it was discovered that the *Planter* was there when DuPont bombarded the forts protecting Port Royal Sound and escaped back to Charleston. Robert Smalls then related that when he escaped to the Union ships, there were “about 4000 men no in C[harleston] and that any force could walk in there very easily.”²¹⁸

The End Of May

The next day, some more battlefield news came Severance’s way. “A couple of young colored men from the Eustis place...came to Beaufort to-day, and we had a grant talk from them.” These two men remarked their surprise that there where, “[n]o soldiers...this side of the [Charleston & Savannah Railroad]²¹⁹, except a picket of ten.” The men then said the soldiers must have, “All gone to Virginia.” A response that Severance admitted he was, “almost

²¹⁷ Severance Journal, May 16, 1862, 35.

²¹⁸ Ibid., May 17, 1862, 35-37. Notwithstanding this confidence displayed by Robert Smalls, Charleston would remain in Confederate hands until the city was abandoned and surrendered to General William T. Sherman during his famous “March to the Sea”, February 18, 1865—just two months before Lee would surrender to Grant in Appomattox, VA. Charleston was under siege for a total of 567 days.

²¹⁹ Located near the mainland’s coast of South Carolina, separated by a few bridges from the Sea Islands, this vital railway connected, as the name suggest, Charleston, SC and Savannah, GA. Ever since the Union had occupied the Sea Islands, efforts were made sporadically to take the railroad hub-town of Pocolaligo, SC and the town’s important depot. Owing to Lee’s defensive measure he implemented in the area (before replacing General Joseph Johnston in Virginia after the latter was wounded during the Peninsula Campaign, March to July, 1862), this important railroad town did not fall into Union hands until the first few weeks of 1865 after Sherman entered South Carolina during his famous march. This occurred just a couple of weeks after he captured Savannah, GA in Christmas of 1864.

tempted to add, ‘All gone from Virginia!’” As for the “gone from Virginia,” it was during this of Hunter’s enlistment, that the overcautious, even paranoid, General George McClellan, in charge of the Army of the Potomac, was conducting what would be called the Peninsula Campaign in Virginia. During this March to July campaign, McClellan was pleading for more and more men since he feared he was outnumbered. Many of these reinforcements that the War Department sent to reinforce McClellan came from those troops stationed in the South Carolina Sea Islands. This, despite the last two months where soldiers and military officers feared a rebel invasion on their position in the islands, more men were taken away from this already small garrison force. That fear became greater now. Regarding Severance’s “gone from Virginia” statement, this is less clear for readers today. The most plausible meaning was that with the numerous losses the Union mustered in the many failed attempts to capture Richmond, Virginia, the fabled “On to Richmond” rally cry was now the butt of jokes. Being defeated and retreating from Virginia multiple times, the new rallying cry was now, “All gone from Virginia.” By this point, McClellan had still not reached Richmond after 2 months of slow marching and fighting. Severance and others, it seemed, had little faith in McClellan and his prospects of capturing Richmond and ending the war.²²⁰

²²⁰ Severance Journal, May 18, 1862, 38. McClellan would never reach Richmond, beyond barely obtaining the outskirts. Just a few days after Severance’s conversation with these two men, Johnston’s defenses of Richmond would keep McClellan at bay. When Johnston was wounded during heavy fighting during his counter-attack to relieve pressure and replaced by Lee, the Confederacy launched an all out counter-attack that drove McClellan back to Union-held Fortress Monroe in early July, 1862. Lincoln would replace McClellan with Major General John Pope shortly after the end of the disastrous campaign, only to see Pope fail as well, and the Union would not see a significant victory against Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia until the 3-day long 1863 battle in Gettysburg, PA (July 1-3). There is evidence that Severance was not alone, within his family, in having a lack of faith, if not outright disdain, for George McClellan. In a letter dated February 4, 1863, Severance’s mother, Caroline, wrote to her son from Boston. In this letter, she recounted to him that while at a party hosted by a John L. Sargents ““for benefit of contrabands,”” General George McClellan arrived. She spare not her thoughts and feelings towards the general. She hoped that the military would court martial him for many things, including his recent debacle during the Peninsula Campaign. She was disgusted that he would even consider running for president in 1864 and expressed that the court martial should happen sooner, rather than later, to ensure he would not begin his presidential campaign. She also found his humility and declarations of retirement to write about his war experiences

As May came to a close, all the events that swamped this month ended, Severance and others rested, but waited anxiously for General Rufus Saxton and the future of the Experiment. Still as a temporary superintendent, Severance confessed that though he was more occupied in his work than when in the Commissary, he wanted to “be placed in some more congenial situation when employed.” Though he did not “object to the work, tho’ it is decidedly dirty [did he mean physically, morally or both?] sometimes,” he just wanted a “little privacy and regularity,” and not have to feel so dirty and confined. Regardless of these worries, he felt that he had “done the best I could, and tried to show my willingness in every way...” He was confident that with Pierce’s help, he could be “provid[ed] for [his] future comfort.” He thought so, because Pierce observed his “readiness to put up with anything.” This was high praise for Severance. Having replaced a sick, overworked, mentally and emotionally exhausted Thorpe, Severance was presumed to be steadier, stronger in the face of adversity for a position now compared to overseers and “nigger-drivers,” and Pierce validated that confidence. Notwithstanding, Severance here admitted that he was done being the superintendent; he wanted something else.

He would get his wish. In 1863, as seen through correspondences with family and friends at home, he would join his father Theodoric in being placed in charge of Confederate-abandoned property and “moveables,” like furniture. He would maintain this employment until June of 1865. Unfortunately, for an unknown reason he did not write about the last days of May (26-31) or the rest of the year 1862 in a journal or diary. He was stricken with malaria, something that would plague him multiple times. He would be home recovering many times throughout mid-1862 to the end 1864, causing a large gap in his own papers, since he was gone from the Experiment for most of those two years.

to be examples of false modesty to play the victim. Nary a positive word was recorded by Caroline Severance. Letters Caroline M. Severance to James S. Severance, February 4, 1863, 7.

Conclusion

April and May 1862 came and went. Despite some instances of many “highs”, such as temporary fixtures for pay issues, Robert Smalls’ escape, and learning the management woes of the Experiment would be more stable, there were just too many “lows.” Distrust and resistance from the contrabands; broken promises of pay and clothing; fear of being captured by the Confederacy, being murdered by mutinous contrabands; Treasury Agents and abolitionists seeing themselves as the dreaded “nigger-driver;” corruption from the cotton trade; a disastrous enlistment effort, and fears of the unknown. All of this caused Severance to boldly pronounce that the end of the Experiment was near, and with it the end of freeing an enslaved people and the war on behalf of the Union. Though others like Towne, Ware, Philbrick, and Pierce lamented setback and bemoaned tyrannical methods by the Union, none of them saw a deadly failure that could come to the Experiment like Severance did. The man who was to apply orders from the Treasury, military, and abolition groups, and work on behalf of the contraband—the man on the ground, with the people—had a better view of how things really were for the Experiment. He also hoped others above him would see that as well.

CONCLUSION

Introduction

Edward Pierce was tasked by U.S. Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, to head to Port Royal in January 1862 as an official observer of the South Carolina Sea Islanders and to report back as to what could be done on behalf of the over 10,000 abandoned slaves. In this report, that was submitted the next month, he noted that there were three areas for development. These three areas would benefit, according to Pierce, the contrabands, the war effort, and the Republican free labor ideology. These three areas of development were: cotton, the Sea Island people, and land reform. The first centered on not simply utilizing cotton as an economic weapon of war to use against the South, but to produce cotton according to the Northern capitalistic methods of wage laborers. In turn, this cotton raised by wage laborers would be used both to fund the war and fund the projects of the Sea Islands. The second objective, centered on transforming the contrabands into educated, paid cotton laborers who could now become American citizens. Citizens who could vote, hold town meetings, and grow Republicanism in the South. The final objective, land reform, was meant to give the contrabands what they were owed: the land that they and their descendants had worked on under oppression for generations. However, from February 1862 to end of the Reconstruction, these three objectives saw little success in the end, and caused much agitation between the white Northerners and black Sea Islanders during the war. During Reconstruction itself, white Southerners were added to the mix and the agitation turned to violence and a reversal of many of the Experiment's successes. James Severance was both a witness and participant during those times of agitations and efforts to achieve the three objectives from April 1862 to a few months following the war's end in 1865.²²¹

²²¹ Kevin Dougherty, *The Port Royal Experiment: A Case Study in Development* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2014), 104-121.

This conclusion will focus on two points: summarizing and analyzing the Experiment since June 1862 with more of Severance's observations and activities during the war, and then a post-war biography of James Severance. The first addresses the following: did any of the challenges and concerns observed by Severance get addressed and repaired? Did things improve, stay the same, or did they get worse for the Experiment? In the end, according to Severance, was the Experiment a success or not? And, what do these unpublished papers of James Severance give to Port Royal scholarship?

As for the postwar biography, we can see the consequences of his work in Port Royal in the way he lived his life; be they the jobs he held, where he lived, and how we reacted to this postwar America. Much of what he and his family left were not drawn out, lengthy, and obvious conversations over the Experiment or Reconstruction, however, those observations and those effects are found in-between the lines of the actions made by Severance. The clearest "in-between the lines" action that is readily available for analysis, was how he preserved his 1864 Rules and Regulations manual after his time with the Experiment.

The Experiment And Severance From June 1862 To August 1865

From June to December 1862, Severance, sick with malaria mostly, left little of record for the latter half of this year.²²² What he thought about Brigadier General Rufus Saxton soon after his July arrival will for now never be known, nor his opinions on the War Department approving the creation of all black regiments months after Hunter's failed enlistment. What we do know about these seven months was that most of Severance's worries seemed to have been amended for the better. Saxton arrived just in time for the July Fourth celebrations held in the Sea Islands. The people celebrated with much zeal since this was their first July Fourth to

²²² His 1862 Diary does go on to the end of the year, but he recorded nothing specific or of consequence about the state of affairs of the Experiment.

celebrate as almost freedmen, due to the Union occupation during November 1861. Though Saxton would never officially be in charge of the Department of the South, he would be a central figure in the management of the Experiment and for the treatment of the freedpeople. He was the embodiment of Washington, D.C. trying to get rid of the confusion that festered Severance and others from March to July 1862. Saxton would defer to the Department head, General Hunter, who would then refer to Stanton in the War Department. The General Superintendents, Treasury Agents, and abolitionists acting as educators and missionaries, would all be under the War Department. For the Experiment this move was positive progression, though not perfect. For now on, there would be no more of the perplexities that had been the norm as everyone had to deal with too many bosses vying to out do the other and implement their own agendas. A state of consistency, in terms of Federal policy for the islands and the people, could now take place.²²³

Hunter disbanded his “regiment” in August, seeing his enlistment as a failure. However, Saxton wrote to Secretary of War Stanton, cautioning him that with troops, what little there were in the Sea Islands, being taken up to Virginia, the area was defenseless for the most part, so more soldiers were needed. Saxton urged Stanton to officially approve the creation of all black regiments. Stanton approved and shipped over 5,000 rifles and called first for a local militia force to be created. The militia effort was not much in the end. Glad to stay home, many of the contrabands did not care for the training and many rifles were be seen lying around, ill kept.

²²³ Dougherty, *Port Royal Experiment*, 29-31; Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 156-157, 180. General Hunter would be reassigned in September of 1862 and replaced by Ormsby Mitchel (the all black slave community in the Sea Islands, Mitchelville, was his idea and named in his honor), who unfortunately would die of yellow fever the next month. John Brannon served from October 1862-Januaray 1863, Hunter would return from January to June 1863, followed Quincy Gilmore (June 1862 to May 1864), John Hatch (May 1-26, 1864), John Foster (May 1864 to February 1865) and then Gilmore again (February 1864 to Novemeber 1865). Then the area would be under control of the Freedmen’s Bureau, with Oliver O. Howard holding the reigns and Saxton placed in the charge of the Sea Islands. The Bureau would, with mixed success, stay in until 1876. Robert Scott, who was the antitheses of Saxton, replaced Saxton in 1866—he had no real love for the freedmen. This change was depressing for both freedmen and Howard’s Bureau, for Saxton was both well loved by the people and had helped bring about great change to the islands.

However, plantation superintends, like Philbrick, kept trying until, when in January 1863, following the Emancipation Proclamation's release, that these regiments would be a reality. By the end of January, two South Carolina volunteer infantry units were formed. However, even then, black soldiers themselves renewed the methods used by Hunter. They chased others from the woods, took them from the fields, and were rough with their fellow men. Efforts this time would be enacted to reverse the rough recruitment methods and a more professional approach took shape. This time, a better ending occurred. With the creation of these two regiments, the arrival of other black regiments, like the 54th Massachusetts to Port Royal, and freedmen now choosing to enlist, all this fostered a feeling of being "free," for the men at least. Thousands would not only join the Union ranks, they would both help defend the islands and take their part in many skirmishes and battles. It was uneven, but the trials to create black regiments were enacted in ways not akin to slavery and compulsion, as Severance and Towne saw it in the last chapter. This change in the operating procedures for the Sea Islands was a greater success for the Experiment. Severance recorded in his 1863 diary that the, "1st S[outh] C[arolina] [Company] I. paraded thro' the town for the first time. Marched and looked finely."²²⁴

Severance himself almost became part of the military war effort. On June 2, 1862, he wrote in his diary that a letter came from his mother Caroline demanding that he, "Come home at once!" However, nothing in his diary after that explained the urgency of the letter. That would come from two sources: a note in his 1862 diary later on and a letter dated July 23, 1863 from

²²⁴ Dougherty, *Port Royal Experiment*, 79-83; Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 267-271; Severance Diary. January 17, 1863. 2. In a letter to Severance from a friend in Boston, Lizzie Powell, she recorded that "Adjutant] Gen[eral] Thomas reports 30,000 black soldiers in the southwest..." The Adjutant General may possibly be Lorenzo Thomas, who had from 1863-1865 been assigned to the Division of the Mississippi to recruit black soldiers. Lizzie Powell told Severance this because she knew it could add a boost for him to go with the black regiments formed in the Sea Islands. This report from Adjutant General Thomas, and the coming New Year was, "all we could expect to the black people." Emancipation and the enlistment of over 30,000 black soldiers were seen as good first year for their freedom. Powell to Severance, December 12, 1863. Unpublished letter found within the Severance Family Papers.

“Cousin Jimmie” in New York. Severance had just been drafted by the military and Jimmie sarcastically congratulated him. In his diary he wrote: “Letter from Mother. 4th [of August]. Come Home. Draft called. 300,000.” In the letter Jimmie first confessed to Severance that he, Jimmie, was not found eligible for the draft, but was not saddened by that, and would respect the government’s decision, yet opined that he’d rather see a citizen of South Carolina drafted instead. Then Jimmie discussed the two ways of avoiding the draft: paying \$300 or hiring a substitute. For the former, Jimmie found that amount fair because he believed that poor men could pay it anyways, and if the price was driven higher in the case of so many substitutes being hired for \$250, no one could afford to pay to either buy out or obtain a substitute. The \$300 was thus suitable for all and would stave off exploitation and would allow people to opt out for whatever reason. Jimmie noted that people do not care for the draft because not only are there so many soldiers in the city, but that they will not come out and accept it because they refused to see the positives he listed. He felt that the deaths of thousands could bring people to accepting the draft and by enlisting more and more to end would the war sooner, thus not having to rely on drafts alone. As for substitutes, Severance could pay for one, but since he was at work for the government already in Port Royal, he could save that money for better use. Jimmie went to denounce the fears of New York’s Copperheads,²²⁵ who claimed that the draft would only embolden the Confederacy to victory and that the draft was as an evil plan to simply throw

²²⁵ “Copperheads” was a name of derision for those Northern Democrats that were against the war and Lincoln. The name is symbolic in that it was to compare these Northern Democrats (also known as Peace Democrats) to copperhead snakes; both being slithering, conniving and devilish creatures found in one’s own backyard—the backyard in this case being the Northern home front and Washington, D.C. Many Copperheads were said to be secretly helping the Confederate government, their armies and bring down moral against the Union cause, willing to have a divided nation. Many Copperheads were found guilty of such crimes. Throughout the war, many Copperheads at home and in the halls of Congress, proudly took upon the name and wore copper “heads” pinned to their jackets made from Liberty Head large cents as a badge of honor. For more on Copperheads see, Jennifer Weber, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln’s Opponents in the North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

people into battle. Jimmie called these Copperheads “devilish.” A month later Severance heard from his mother about the draft. She sought his advice. Already, it was eluded, that he would not be drafted but would opt out. However, by which course? Would he pay the \$300 or find a substitute. His mother, not knowing which one to take, did remind him that a substitute would be cheaper, yet he had ensure that he was to find a reliable man to act as substitute before paying the money, possibly the \$250 Jimmie mentioned. She wanted an answer soon. In the end, it is obvious to a reader that he chose one of the paths out of the draft, but so far no record exists over which path he took.²²⁶

Why did he not accept the draft or volunteer later for the army? Surely, taking up arms in the name of Union and abolition, the latter coming from the Severance’s activist background, would be an honorable way to ensure success for those two objectives. There is no evidence that the Severance family felt that soldiering was evil or not a wise approach to take in the war effort, so that conclusion can be thrown out. The only viable conclusion is thus: Severance was already taking part in the war effort, a part that was both political and social, why would he leave that work? Yes, it has been argued that from April to May 1862 that things were far from certain with the Experiment’s success and that it was doing good in general, but it was now July of 1863 when the letter from cousin Jimmie arrived. From May 1862 to this July day in 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation was signed; the Mississippi River was in Union hands; Confederate General Robert E. Lee had been defeated in a battle, finally, at Gettysburg, and the issues of treatment of the contrabands (freedmen at this point) in the Sea Islands and the managerial aspects of the Experiment had changed for the better. These events taken together had undoubtedly given Severance more confidence for the Experiment’s fate, as well as the fate the

²²⁶ Severance Diary, June 2 and August 11, 1862. 9, 12; Jimmie to Severance, July 23rd, 1863. Unpublished and found within Severance Family Papers and Caroline Severance to Severance, August 9, 1862. Also unpublished.

freedmen. To stick with his current participation in the war effort in the Sea Islands would be the only course to maintain. As men fought and died to ensure the restoration of the Union and bring emancipation to the slaves of the South, he would politically, socially, and one can add financially, help the freedmen in their homes. His work was just as honorable as putting on a uniform.

As for Pierce's three objectives, Severance left little through 1863 to 1865 over what occurred concerning cotton, developing the people, and land reform. However, through efforts of those like Rose, Dougherty, Saville, and Ochiai, we know much about what took place.

With cotton, we have seen in the previous chapters what a mixed bag that crop was for the Experiment. Pierce, Towne, and Philbrick all noted that though great pains were made to pay the laborers to continue working the cotton, the laborers were not having it; many were tired of the talk about cotton. However, these three individuals noted that people in many areas of the islands did work the cotton willingly for the "Yankees," whom they finally came to see as liberators and protectors. On the flip side, Severance was not as optimistic. Whether recording his thoughts or those of Special Treasury Agents who were plantation superintendents, the laborers were both passively and actively resisting cotton production.²²⁷ The agent-superintendents, such as Thorpe, Park, and Sumner, were at their wits end as they came to see themselves as the dreaded "nigger-driver," compelling men to plant cotton. Something they did not come to Port Royal for. Severance himself furiously wrote that the U.S. government would be better off dumping all the cotton into the ocean, riding itself of the crop all together. However, this did not stop the work of cotton.

²²⁷ The former consisted of superintendents having to 'babysit' the laborers to make sure they get the allotted planting done for the day, since it was observed the laborers were purposefully taking their time and the latter involved laborers leaving the cotton fields to work on their subsistence crops, laborers leaving the fields and persuading others to stop planting, many threatening agents and some equipment being damaged.

Cotton at the time, American cotton, was competing with the cotton markets in Egypt, India and Brazil. Northern industrialists and cotton merchants did not want American cotton to be dominated by these foreign markets. At the same time, the Federal government relied on cotton to produce the much-needed cash to help fund the ongoing war. These international and domestic concerns drove the demand for more cotton. Added to the domestic concerns, abolitionists, merchants, and Republican politicians saw cotton production under the tutelage of free labor ideology as critical for both military and ideological successes against the South. They also saw it as a way to help create 4 million more “consumers” for the American markets. Argued by Rose, Dougherty, Foner, and Ochiai, is that the North essentially preserved the plantation, but filled it with paid laborers in the place of enslaved “property.” The North wanted to recreate the factory system but with fields and not buildings; wage laborers and not slaves. This cotton objective meshed with land reform, of which more will be discussed below. Here, both Foner and Saville argue that the demand for cotton conflicted with the goals of the freedmen. While Northerners believed since the laborers were paid and could vote, that was freedom for the freedmen. However, the freedmen saw freedom as owing their own land, planting what they wanted to plant, and not to be under white authority again. The white Northerners needed to adapt to the freedmen’s views on things, but that never really took shape during the war and subsequent Reconstruction. Cotton was always needed. Even then, Pierce and others celebrated about how much cotton was grown between 1863 and 1865, even if it never matched antebellum numbers. For seeing so much cotton grown in general was seen as a vindication of free labor ideology.²²⁸

²²⁸ Dougherty, *Port Royal Experiment*, 54-57, 104-108; Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 19, 204-205, 224; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harpers & Collins 1988), 51-54; Akiko Ochiai “The Port Royal Experiment Revisited: Northern Visions of Reconstruction and the Land Question,”

Surprisingly, given his agitation over cotton production to the point of wishing the government would rid itself of it, beginning in January 1863, Severance had a change of tune. It was not that he sought his own profit from cotton or praised the government's efforts with cotton, he wrote in his diaries his excitement over how much was harvested. Throughout 1863 and 1865 he records how much cotton was ginned and ready for shipment north. "Mr. P. estimates the cotton on St. H[elen] at 26,061 lbs. ginned. Soule's estimate was 7000!" "Much cotton came in to-day." "Ginning goes on well. 17 bales ready to ship," "A most busy day at gin house. All the '61' cotton finished up. Philbrick back from Coosaw [Island] with Hill and a whole grist of cotton. Took till dark to get in all the cotton." And so on. Having no record of his from June to December 1862, we will never know for sure why the sudden change. There are two possibilities for such a change. One is that by January 1863, he became resigned to the fact that cotton would still be "King" for the present and near future and that the demand of cotton would never waver. So, he came to terms with this and just worked through it as best he could. The second is that with the Emancipation Proclamation, he saw a light at the end of the tunnel. Meaning, that for the duration of the war at least, if the freedpeople could just plant the cotton and work with those Northerners in the Experiment, the Sea Islanders could then be truly free to work as they desired once the war was over. The Proclamation gave him hope that the work will be worth it and now marveled at how much could be harvested, ginned, and shipped during the war, done now by a freed people. There may be more possibilities as to why he changed his

New England Quarterly 74, no.1 (2001): 96, 99, 106 and Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Labor in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1994).

attitude towards cotton, but we will never know for sure unless his latter 1862 journal can be found.²²⁹

It should be noted here as well, that Severance was also assigned to do more than work with cotton since 1862. In a report towards the end of 1864, Severance was tasked with recording all sales and payments received from confiscated Confederate property. In this report, he recorded that he received payment from a William H. Aeden, who had just purchased “one pair of wheels” and “two cows” from Frogmore Plantation located on St. Helena Island. While this was one case of Severance working with confiscated property, there was little else preserved or can be found that he was involved with other such scenarios. He was mostly involved with cotton harvesting and Commissary work. His father Theodoric was the one that worked mostly with confiscated property and tax commissioners.²³⁰

Land reform took center stage from 1863 to the end of Reconstruction. Of the three objectives singled out by Pierce, this one would cause the most troubles. Freedmen would feel betrayed and those like Saxton, Towne, and Oliver Howard (during Reconstruction) would be the most shamed, if not horrified. As for Severance, again we have little from him. Only a few

²²⁹ Severance 1863 Diary dates, January 5, 8, 20 & 31. March 12, 25, 26 & 27. April 3, 4 & 6, pgs. 1-3, 6-8. Severance 1865 Diary dates, January 6, 19 & 21. 1, 3. Florida cotton was also added to the cotton drive for the Department of the South, especially during 1864. In a letter from Albert Gallatin Browne, Jr., General Superintendent and Severance’s immediate boss at the time, Browne told Severance that he lamented that the people of the New England felt that all the lose of life in Florida was not worth the state’s cotton. Browne felt that cotton there would be a boon for the war and the cotton merchants. Browne to Severance, February 2, 1864. Unpublished letter found within the Severance Family Papers. Browne himself was in Florida in March of the same year. In a report to Severance recorded by Browne’s assistant, John Pilsbury, Severance was forewarned that both cotton and turpentine from the Jacksonville area, along with confiscated “moveables,” such as furniture was being stored and soon shipped to Port Royal where it would be recorded and shipped north. Pilsbury to Severance, March 2, 1864. One additional to Severance, where he was to help take action towards cotton, was dated March 8, 1864 from his father, Theodoric.

²³⁰ Severance to the Fourth Supervising Special Agency of the Treasury Department, Beaufort, SC., December 31, 1864. The payment was received and recorded on February 7, 1865. These agencies were created from the Confiscation Act passed in 1861, and given more power over confiscated properties by the 1862 Confiscation Act. The Sea Islands and occupied areas of Georgia and Florida were assigned to the Fourth Agency, and later became the Fifth Agency by wars end.

entries in his 1863 diary set the stage for what historians have spent a lot of their research on: the failure of land reform. The issue stems from the differing versions of land ownership. Julie Savile, Kevin Dougherty, and Akiko Ochiai cover this well. Before going into the works of these historians, a look at what Severance said will suffice in introducing the problems with land reform in Port Royal.

Early March 1863, Severance recorded: “Land sales opened on St. Hel[ena]. Philbrick a large buyer. [Tax Commissioners] disposed to run up high prices.” The next day, “Land sales continued. Ladies’ Island entirely sold out to-day.” Later, “sales continued. Port Royal [Island] half sold.” And finally, “All plantations sold.” These entries are brief but there was one common theme: nothing on record about the freedmen or how much of the land they worked on for generations they were able own for themselves. One individual, however, was singled out: Edward Philbrick.²³¹

Edward Philbrick would own over 8,000 acres of land, about one-third of St. Helena Island! This abolitionist came to Port Royal from Boston in March 1862 as a hybrid Treasury Agent and educator, but would end up becoming the largest landowner of the Sea Islands and his venture in the cotton markets would generate a healthy surplus for his livelihood. To compare, towards the end of 1864, roughly 4% of the Sea Islands 80,000 cultivated acres for sale would end up in freedmen’s hands, about 3,200 acres. It was here that Philbrick would really thrust forward the Republican wage labor plans for the freed populace of the Sea Islands. Saville writes that Philbrick issued orders for times his laborers would clock in and out, system of wages according to cotton planted or picked, time off for personal farming—essentially a paid version of antebellum gang labor, where workers were to work day and night on all or certain days until

²³¹ Severance Diary. March 9-12, 1863. 5-6. It is not explained more on this entry or anywhere else, but it alluded to these Tax Commissioners willingly, with no sympathy, to raise the prices of the confiscated property to make it harder for the freedpeople from purchasing the land and keeping it in white hands.

the job was done, with everyone working on the land. No time off unless deemed by the master and closely supervised. In the Sea Islands, the slaves had enjoyed the more relaxed task system. Under this system they were assigned to various tasks and once completed, they were done and they were not closely supervised. Philbrick was met with resistance over his gang-system and system of wages and was obliged to adapt towards the freedmen in order to get them to stay on and work his land. Although the freedmen wanted the land, being able to force a white Northerner to adapt eased their burdens a bit, and of course, Philbrick began to profit from it. Even though the resistance stopped, Akiko Ochiai, in her 2014 work, argues that all throughout the war and afterwards, the freedmen just wanted their land and to be left alone to plant as they pleased—that would never happen.²³²

Philbrick's being the largest landowner did not bode well with his fellow Northerners. Laura Towne and others, as noted by Dougherty, mocked Philbrick as "The Philanthropist" and worried that his true motives coming to Port Royal were to own land and make money, not to help the ex-slave. Those Northerners who ended up working under Philbrick as supervisors saw themselves, negatively, as commercial imperialists, and most feared that this situation would not look good back home. Ironically enough, Philbrick's vision of what was termed a plantation system with wages, did in fact act out the free labor ideology of the North. The North saw, as mentioned above, the Sea Islanders as the future consumers of Northern goods. If they could successfully transform the enslaved into a new class of paid workers, these workers would go on to purchase all the necessities and desires of life as an American worker—pots, pans, clothes, candles and furniture, to name a few. And in order to create these new buyers, Northerners

²³² Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction*, 8, 56, 42-51, 56, 59, 62-63, 113; Akiko Ochiai, *Harvesting Freedom: African American Agrarianism in Civil War Era South Carolina* (Contributions in American History, Westport, CT Praeger Publishing 2014).

focused on making the populace “self-owners” of themselves and of objects, rather than what the people wanted: land ownership. And by becoming wage laborers, paid by the hour, they could prosper morally knowing they were American workers and contributing to society by materially prospering and buying items. Philbrick tried to justify his purchases by declaring that he was creating a situation where people would begin to appreciate land if they could but work it. Here Foner retorts that for over 250 years up to Philbrick’s statement, these people had worked the land as slaves and therefore already appreciated the land. They wanted that land for themselves finally.²³³

There were two efforts to remedy the land issue in the favor of the freedmen: one by design, the other by military necessity. And both would fail. When the Sea Islands were preparing to sell the confiscated land, General Rufus Saxton wrote to Stanton and Lincoln and had approved a measure that dated back to the 1840s as the western frontier was being settled: preemption. Preemption means to entitle those who had worked and cultivated land prior to a sale to be able to purchase that land for themselves at a fixed price and have the first rights to that land. Saxton’s obvious thinking centered on what Foner stated, that these people and their ancestors had already worked the land for over 200 years and those living at the time had already been working on the land since the Sea Islands were occupied in November 1861. His plan was approved and he worked from January to March 1863 to prepare the people to purchase the land by pooling their wages together and to be ready for the sales. However, those against preemption won out by arguing that lowering the value of the land for a specific people was, note the irony here, an injustice on inequality that denied ownership to other people. On the day the land sales,

²³³ Dougherty, *The Port Royal Experiment*, 54-57, 110-115; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 53.

the passes of preemption distributed out to the freedmen were denied, thus paving the way for Philbrick's actions and the feeling of betrayal by the freedpeople toward the U.S. government.

The military action would come in January 1865 when General William Sherman during his gloried (but hated by others) "March to the Sea," issued Special Field Order No. 15. This order declared that the land along the coast from the south of Charleston down to St. John's River in Florida and twenty miles into the interior, was to be reserved for the freedmen. A noble gesture and bold move, Sherman's main reason for this was to relieve himself of the hundreds of black refugees that followed him from Chattanooga, Tennessee to Savannah, Georgia and then to Columbia, South Carolina. Abolitionists and freedmen cheered. Those already in this reserve and the refugees flooded in and staked claims for settlement. However, when President Andrew Johnson issued Amnesty Proclamation in May 29, 1865, he revoked the Order and returned the land to those Southerners he amnestied. Once again the freedpeople were denied land, their idea of freedom, and again felt betrayed by the government. They were destined from then on out to sharecrop the land, with few, if any, being able to outright own the land they desired.²³⁴

The objective of "people", that is, the in developing and advancing the freedmen, was a more complex issue for the Experiment throughout the war and Reconstruction. This objective was only successful when propped up by outside forces, but was never allowed to survive on its own by the creation of stable interior forces once the outside force was withdrawn. Kevin Dougherty compared this to placing a hand in a bucket of water. Once the hand is in the bucket, the water level, in this case representing stability, civic development, and freedoms, rose or increased these three influences on the Sea Island populace. However, when the ability (or desire) to keep the hand in waned, the hand is withdrawn and the water level would then subside

²³⁴ Dougherty, *The Port Royal Experiment*, 56-57, 114-117; Ochiai, "Port Royal Revisited," 101-102, 108-109, 113, 117-118.

to where it was originally was located. Dougherty is arguing here that although during the war, and during Reconstruction for the most part, there was stability, development, and freedom for the populace, it was increased and stayed so only by virtue, the patience, and the ability of the Federal government and the military to prop it all up. When that ability and virtue waned, the Northern people grew impatient. When withdrawn, white Southerners were able to take advantage of a weak interior structure and reclaim, or “redeem,” the islands and the state, and take away most of the freedoms given to the freedpeople. In another example, Dougherty brings up “IBL,” or, “Institutionalization Before Liberalization.” Here, in rebuilding a society or nation, the government needs to ensure that institutions, be they schools, political parties, militias, and self-supporting peoples, are infused and solidified within, with help from an outside force, before efforts are made to liberalize, enfranchise, and empower people politically. This is to be done because once people have institutions and can stabilize and protect themselves, then can they be able to be politically empowered and maintain it—on their own. The Port Royal Experiment was a reversal of IBL. The abolitionists and the government both rushed to free and enfranchise the Sea Islanders while maintaining a military presence. Though some education was done for children and few adults, that work was a backstage project while the military freed and protected people and the government made them citizens. Then once enfranchised, some effort was made to institutionalize the islands. Institutionalize means to create and ensure stable educational, political, and economical systems were in place and could function without these outside forces. However, during Reconstruction, the institutionalization was supported by the military only. Even then, that outside force could not handle the Black Codes.²³⁵ Once the military as removed,

²³⁵ In short, the Black Code refer to laws instituted in varying degrees by the Southern States that sought to restrict the freedoms of the freedpeople and their descendants without overtly taking away the freedoms in whole. Restricting the freedoms and advancements of the freedpeople created a neo-slave status in the South, a new form of oppression of a race of people.

the Jim Crow laws came into place and they stymied the work of liberalization, causing institutions, such as the schools, to be retrograded by new white southern leaders. Because of doing IBL backwards, Dougherty and Rose credibly argue that Reconstruction failed, or killed the Port Royal Experiment. Again as Thomas Higginson wrote, a “revolution [went] backwards.” All three objectives either had little success, such as in enfranchising the freedmen, but overall none of the three were achieved for the long-term advancement of the freedmen.²³⁶

Post-War Biography Of James Severance

Severance sailed for home on August 22, 1865. He was 19 when he arrived in April 1862 and was 23 when he sailed for home. He had spent almost every birthday in the Sea Islands. However, much like his pre-Experiment life, we must look to the biography on his mother Caroline for a record of his life after the war. The information within this book is gleaned from surviving letters between the Severances. As of now, no other records, be they diaries or journals from James Severance are known. That being said, information of his postwar life is short in detail.

Severance did not return to Harvard after the war. Ever since he arrived home, and for the rest of his life, he would suffer from various illnesses²³⁷ attributed to his time in South Carolina. Instead of schooling, he joined his father Theodoric at a banking and brokerage house located in Boston, R.L. Day and Company. Though his decision to stop his education was an interesting one there was no reasoning of this decision left for readers today. However, his decision to work in a banking institution does make sense when we look at Theodoric. His father worked for banks all during Severance’s young life, which was influential. Added to that was his work in

²³⁶ Dougherty, *The Port Royal Experiment*, 108-109, 155-166; Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 378-408; Thomas W. Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Cambridge 1900), 63-64.

²³⁷ While malaria and ague are named as the many ailments to afflict Severance, the letters from family and his records allude to other illnesses without actually naming what they were.

Port Royal with the Commissary, as a plantation superintendent, and some work with cotton shipping and confiscated property, gave Severance some experience that better qualified him for such employment. However, while he wanted stability during his tenure in Port Royal, his life after the war was not stable. And not just his life alone, but some of his family members joined him in his adventures.²³⁸

In 1869, both Severance and his father quit their jobs at R.L. Day, where Theodoric then set about to be a hotelkeeper in Boston, with Severance as his assistant. However, that only lasted a year. Needing employment, and for some reason, needing to leave Boston, Theodoric employed himself in Chattanooga, Tennessee with the Chattanooga and Atlanta Railroad. Severance stayed in Boston, working as a partner with a florist establishment: Barnard, Hunnewell and Severance. Severance, however, stayed on for two years. In 1872 he made the bold step, the first of the family, to go to the West. Enjoying San Francisco the most, he had decided to settle down Santa Barbara. This decision to live in Santa Barbara revolved around two things: real estate opportunities in the Simi Valley and sheep. The former, Severance believed he could generate enough income to support the family and bring them all to California. As for the latter, raising sheep as career really stemmed from his youthful optimism and not experience; he being a city boy all his life with his only experience recorded of having dealt with such animals being those mules back in 1862. He wrote many letters to family trying to persuade them to move to the area. His younger brother, Mark, was the first of the family to join Severance in 1874. At this time, probably seeing the end game as a failure, Severance gave up on sheep and instead took to mining and was able to get Mark to join him. Most peculiar about this mining venture, was that Severance referred to the mines in the region as “coal mines,” even though the

²³⁸ Virginia Elwood-Akers, *Caroline Severance* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse Press 2010), 82.

area was known more for a number of smaller gold mines instead. During the same year, Caroline wanted to be with her sons in California and was able to get Theodoric to come along. Caroline and Theodoric would be the last of the Severances to move to California. The youngest, Pierre, was married and successful in his work for a Boston-based glass company and Julia had married her soldier, Edward Burrage, Third Sergeant of the 44th Massachusetts, and they stayed in New England. Before learning of his parents' decision to move, Severance had been complaining about the area's recent drought and his poverty. Yet, after the learned of their pending move, he went back to extolling what great things the state had to offer.²³⁹

From 1865 to 1874, Severance had been courting a young woman, simply remembered now as "Sallie." Marriage was discussed for the two, but Severance wanted to hold off until he could make a living for himself in California to bring her home too. However, by 1874, communication had ceased. Either she grew tired of waiting and married someone else or Sallie was pushed into marriage, her family seeing that Severance would not be able to settle down and make enough money, and fast, for their daughter. Caroline did try to have daughter Julia talk Sallie out of the marriage and move to California to see Severance, but Julia informed her mother that Sallie had grown tired waiting for Severance. Severance let Sallie go and marriage was never brought up for him again for the rest of his life.²⁴⁰

By the time Carolina and Theodoric came to Santa Barbara in 1875, Severance, according to his mother, was "mum" about his mining and both her sons had purchased land for their father. Theodoric had expressed to the family his dream of being a gentleman farmer, so the sons bought land and supplies to help him out in his dream that included cultivating avocados.

²³⁹ Ibid., 110, 114-115, 118-119.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 108, 118-120.

However, this farming venture of Theodoric's lasted a couple of years. While in the area, the Severance's stayed with friend and former sheep business partner of their son; the name of the old partner was Edward Ivison. The Ivison's housed the family until they could find a place of their own. At the same time, Severance was on to his next business venture, this time in Los Angeles, which at the time was populated with around 11,000 people and dirty. Nevertheless Severance prophesized to his mother that this little city would be a "metropolis in Southern California" and could be the capitol of a new state in the future. He was only half-right.

Severance and Mark also bought land near Los Angeles, and their parents decided to move to Los Angeles instead; Theodoric leaving behind his avocados he worked on for a year. In 1876, they found a nice cottage near a large orange orchard,²⁴¹ the streets being West Adams and Figueroa.²⁴² They named their cottage "Red Roof" because it literally had a red roof, which was unique to the area.²⁴³ Despite this good news, bad news followed. The land near Los Angeles that Severance and Mark had purchased was part of a legal dispute that went back to 1843; the portion they purchased was done innocently, not knowing the legal issues at hand. The whole area under question, called "Muscupiabe," was originally land shared between an American and an Englishman, later sold to a third party. However, the actual size and layout of the land were under question by both owners and the state government. The "Red Roof" was unfortunately within the area of dispute and the legal issues drained what little money the family had, which caused them to rely on their youngest, Pierre, to loan them cash. He did help, and he chided them for being in such a situation. For some years later, Mark's wife, Annie Crittenden, who came

²⁴¹ The orchard is now what is modern-day Hollywood.

²⁴² This area is now a well-preserved section of Victorian Homes that lie a few miles west of downtown Los Angeles.

²⁴³ Elwood-Akers, *Caroline Severance*, 124-128.

from a wealthy family in San Francisco, also helped the Severances out with their financial woes. The Crittenden's would help support the "Red Roof" for close to two decades, even if it caused strains between Mark and Annie, Annie and the Severance family in general, and the two families. Although in both 1882 and 1888, court battles went their way, the Severance's kept the cottage, mainly through Severance's advice that keeping it until a railroad came through boosted the value. They would hold onto to it until after Caroline's death in 1914.²⁴⁴

In 1877, Severance had to leave the family for a time. He was 35 and single, and his attempts with real estate failed (as did sheep ranching). He did earn a tiny income singing for their Unitarian church. In the end, he had to find work. He found it with the silver mine located south of Death Valley called the Resting Spring Mine. When the mine was purchased by a Los Angeles based smelting company, Severance became and smelter and investor for the company. In 1879 however, Severance left for San Francisco and worked for the Central Pacific Railroad in their Freight Agents Office. He would stay with the railroad for many years. Yet, life was still not stable for him. In 1880 in San Francisco, while the family was living in the Galindo Hotel for a time after Mark's wedding to Annie Crittenden in 1879, Severance woke up to his room in flames. After sounding the alarm, he fought the fire, only for Mark, Annie, and Severance to lose everything except a few items rescued and what they had on them. Mark and Annie found a new home in Oakland. Severance found a new one in San Francisco.²⁴⁵

In 1897, Severance was still in San Francisco and was supporting his mother financially and emotionally, more so after Theodoric died in 1892. Caroline was still very active in politics,

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 130, 135, 140, 196.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 130, 132-133, 135, 137.

this time with Christian Socialism,²⁴⁶ Free Kindergarten,²⁴⁷ and still working for the Suffrage movement. Caroline had given a speech that year, which was incoherent and must have upset a lot of people, for Severance urged his mother to retire from her activism because she was becoming incorrigible. He felt she must act her age (77). This was ironic, since at the age of 55, he was learning to ride the new craze, the bicycle.²⁴⁸

In 1902, Severance, now 60, became somewhat endeared towards a young widow. His friend Sid Smith's daughter Ethel, had married a U.S. naval officer in her 20s, only to find out he was murdered a year later by natives in the South Seas. At first being a shoulder to cry on, Severance's feelings for her grew and they spent a lot of time together for a few years. Severance would continue to play peacemaker between the Crittendens and Severances, often failing to help being peaceful resolutions. Tensions would remain for a number of years between the two families. Some tension did come between Severance and his mother in 1906. She wanted to publish a type of memoir and needed a \$1,000 loan, of which he refused for a time. He and his siblings found both the narratives and introduction put together by friends to be incoherent and self-serving, and were miffed that she wrote little to nothing about her children. Severance did

²⁴⁶ This religious-political ideology had been around since the 1830s. In short, Christian Socialists believe that capitalism was sin, a sin that caused inequality, idolatry and greed. The remedy for them was centered on their socialistic interpretations of the Christ's teachings, which focused on equality, the disdain for money, taking care of everyone and living as one. James Severance was a capitalist, he said so in letters to family, so he most likely did not agree with this philosophy, but we do not know exactly what he thought of his mother's involvement. What we do know is that he was supportive of her all her life, even helped her with her Christians Socialist events in terms of transportation and simply not criticizing her about it.

²⁴⁷ Free Kindergarten came from the 1830's when Friedrich Froebel established a school for children that utilized nature, music, stories and playtime. Teachers for these kindergartens were to geometry and crafts to help train children. Most governments of Europe feared it because it was so unorthodox. The school moved to England then the United States, where the first Kindergarten was established in 1860 in Boston. Caroline Severance was aware of Kindergarten while in Boston, but the war kept her from focusing on it. It would be in the 1880s when she finally became more involved. In California, Kindergarten was not applied in many areas and had little support. Caroline took this issue under wing to help persuade people to support it and the state of adopt into its educational curriculum. By WW1 the system was established nation-wide.

²⁴⁸ Elwood-Akers, *Caroline Severance*, 198-199, 204, 208-209.

compromise that if given another year, he would have enough money so that a loan would not be necessary, and the money would be more of a gift. He did as promised; the memoir had some success, but hardly enough to matter, even if those of literary fame, such as Jack London, praised it publicly.²⁴⁹

The biggest adventure for Severance came in April 12, 1906—the great San Francisco Earthquake and Fire. Severance was living in the city at the time and Caroline sought communication and any information about her son. After a number of days fearing the worse, she finally heard from him—and he was jovial! He wrote that he had survived in one piece and had survived for three days on only cheese, crackers, and sardines, yet lost everything else. Then he was able to secure a horse and buggy and for many days helped shuttle refugees to a crisis center established in nearby Menlo Park. He stayed in the city and reestablished himself and his finances as his brother Mark helped Caroline financially until he, Severance, was able to do it himself again.²⁵⁰

Severance still tried getting his mother to retire from her activism and now tried to stop her from new adventures: the automobile and the airplane. While he failed in the activism part of her life, he was able to keep her from driving a car and flying a plane, fearing her advanced age of 90, would only end in death while driving or flying. Although he could not get her to stop her politics, he was with her all the way, even escorting her in 1911 to register to vote for the first time in her life. Although records from the 1911 registration have since then been destroyed, legend has it that Severance had escorted the first lady to register for a presidential election in American history. Severance wrote to his mother at this time that he believed women's

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 219-220, 235-236. The title of Caroline's 'memoir' would later become the name she is remembered by to this day, at least in California: The Mother of Clubs.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 239.

involvement in politics would make government better. Although they differed over capitalism, both son and mother allied when it came to political party. Though Caroline would have rather been supportive of the Socialist Party candidate, Eugene V. Debs, she felt that the former Republican president and now Progressive Party candidate, Teddy Roosevelt, was both more viable and likely to win. Severance had already been working for the Roosevelt campaign in San Francisco and he and Caroline chided, most likely lovingly, Mark for supporting the Democratic candidate, Woodrow Wilson. On November 5, 1912, reporters surrounded Caroline asking whom she voted for. She answered that she voted for Roosevelt. Although Roosevelt lost, Severance encouraged his mother to celebrate anyways, for she had finally done what she had dreamed of doing since the 1840s, to vote.²⁵¹

Caroline Severance died in 1914, at the age of 93. Severance moved to Los Angeles, taking care of the “Red Roof” cottage, though rechristened by Caroline as “El Nido,” or “The Nest,” a number of years earlier. He had a house built near “El Nido” and Severance remained in the home until his death 1936 at the age of 94. The street was renamed “Severance Street” in the family’s honor.²⁵²

Severance On The Experiment After The War

Now, what did Special Treasury Agent James Severance think about the Port Royal Experiment and his work there? No clue. In what papers of his that were preserved, he wrote nothing about the Experiment or his time there, beyond believing that due to the illnesses that nagged him the rest of his life, he might have to return to the area to have the climate help him out. What can be concluded about his feelings about his time in the Sea Islands can only be

²⁵¹ Ibid., 245, 250, 258, 263, 268. The letter to Caroline from Teddy Roosevelt thanking her for her support is in possession of the Emett family.

²⁵² Ibid., 272, 274-275.

speculated. One key item from his time there may be a large clue: his 1864 Rules and Regulations manual issued by the Treasury Department. This manual was the first, and only, of its kind published during the war. And it came into his possession months before the war ended. He held onto this manual and sometime after the war, he had it rebounded and turned into a type of book when he took to the William Man Manufacturer of Blank Books and Counting House Stationer in Philadelphia. The book cover was even inscribed with: “J.S. Severance.” He must have thought highly of his work during the Experiment to have this manual repaired and better preserved for us today. As to why it was important, it should be recalled that Edward Pierce jokingly told Laura Towne, as recorded in chapter three, that there was no system of management in place in Port Royal. And that Severance himself worried over the fact that the War and Treasury Departments, and the abolitionist groups, held authority and all had their own agendas, causing all three to clash, with him caught in the middle. This manual coming over two years after all authority was finally concentrated to once agency, the War Department, spoke volumes of the progress the Experiment was experiencing. One of his worries was that this mismanagement of affairs would doom the Experiment to fail during the war. Now he had proof that management during the war was straightened out and things could then move smoothly.

He also worried about how the government was treating the contrabands, later freedmen, of the Sea Islands. Namely, forcing them to keep planting cotton and placing them in a state of limbo—they were told they were free, but were not treated as free and often reminded that they were not quite free. The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, and this 1864 manual, was evidence that progress was being made. Now they were officially free and the manual set aside rules on how they were to be treated, employed, and cared for until they could support themselves.

However, he, like many others at the time, did not foresee the work of Reconstruction and the damage both Reconstruction and the South's redemption by white Southerners would inflict on what was accomplished in Port Royal. Since he spoke nothing of it while in Boston and California, again, speculation is needed. Was he too busy to write about it? Not likely, since as seen above, he and his family stayed in touch on all things politics and social issues. What can be surmised is that as abolitionists, they were not just mournful of what happened to their life's work, but being forward, progressive people, they held onto to the hope things would be righted again. They helped end slavery and prepared a people for citizenship, and the female population in general as well, during the war; work could commence again to reestablish the freemen. Yet since having moved to California, they were not as close to the scenes of actions to be of any service. However, they could hopefully from California bring in people to Washington, D.C. to correct what went wrong. Also their experiences with the enslaved also helped prepare them for not just the female population, but for Asian peoples in the West Coast.

Another thing to consider is that Severance, being as unstable as he was in life postwar, feared to make his own speculations concerning the unstable South, in terms of race. Though adamant about his work in Port Royal and in his abolition upbringing in terms of helping the enslaved, the uncertainties and reversals in the South were too much for him. Things had become too risky to stake a future on. A more feasible possibility was that he must have felt that his work during the war and what took place until 1877 was, as Eric Foner argues, "unfinished." Severance lived through a lot of change: the booming of the West, specifically in California; the growth of the American Empire; women, such as his mother, being able to vote; black enfranchisement; planes; cars; a world war; a government taking care of more and more people; the fluctuating rights of Asian immigrants, and the rise of more social issues. He was witnessing

a growing America that was unstable in the sense that things were changing rapidly. Seeing so much national change caused him to be silent, ruminating on the fate of the Sea Islanders he spent 4 years with. He must have sat, watched, and read about their fate hoping in the end that his work would not be for nothing. He must have had hope in order for him to keep his Rule and Regulations manual, for he saw this as proof that his work was worth it. And despite the serious setbacks in the South, America could redeem itself again by saving the Experiment that did fail as he prophesized, though not while his was there during the war, but after he left. He had hope.

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APPENDIX A



Office of Research Integrity

July 8, 2016

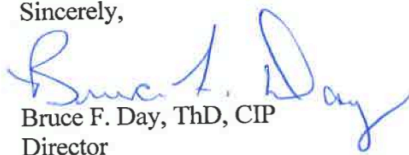
Mike Emett
755 Shaw St.
Barboursville, WV 25504

Dear Mr. Emett:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract entitled "*Or This Whole Affair is a Failure*": *A Special Treasury Agent's Observations of the Port Royal Experiment, Port Royal, South Carolina, April to May, 1862*. After assessing the abstract it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making this determination. Since the information in this study does not involve human subjects as defined in the above referenced instruction it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future protocols that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,



Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP
Director

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