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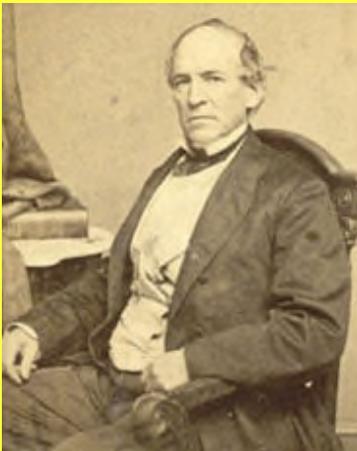
A Michigan Civil War Sesquicentennial
History Partner

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Michigan Civil War Sesquicentennial Circular



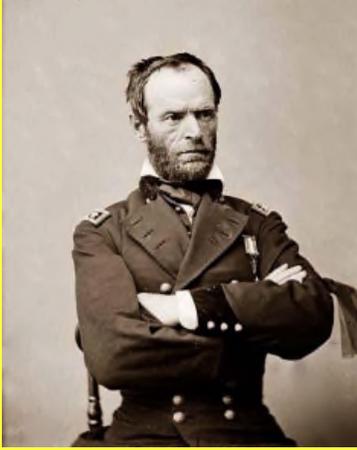
Michigan Remembers the Civil War -

Although we are in the month of February, this will count as the January issue. There were a few glitches with my Robly account in getting this issue of the Circular created.

We've had a relatively easy winter in terms of snow...up until this past weekend when Grand Rapids received 9-plus inches. The weather in January of 1865 was so cold in Washington, DC, that the Potomac River had frozen over.

One hundred and fifty years ago, Horatio Nelson Taft (photo top left), a friend of the Lincolns, entered the following into his diary -

"New Years" has passed off very



pleasantly. There has been a great deal of "Calling" and the City has been full of people. There was a great rush at the Presidents House. I went the "rounds" calling upon most of the Heads of Departments. I noticed a great contrast between this "New Years" and any previous one for the past three years, four years ago there was a solemn stillness, a burthensome weight hanging upon the minds of all, a fearful forboding of Evil, a dread of the future. It was but little better three years or two years ago, doubt and anxiety for the future and horror and dismay at the terrible war oppressed all. Even one year ago we could scarcely see any light. Today all are in good spirits, but still there is many a tear and many a sigh for the lost ones.

They could not have known the President would be assassinated and the war end in the next four months.

January of 1865 was also busy regarding the black man. Below, you'll learn more about how Major General William T. Sherman (photo bottom left) was involved.

As historians, living history presenters and reenactors, we are entering the final months of the Sesquicentennial commemorations. Let's do our best to conclude this special time with as much energy and enthusiasm as we did at the kick-off events in 2011.

Thank you for your support in remembering Michigan in the Civil War.

Bruce B. Butgereit,
Executive Director



The Issue of Slavery in 1865 -

January 9: The Constitutional Convention of Tennessee voted to abolish slavery in the state.

January 11: The Constitutional Convention of Missouri voted to abolish slavery in the state.

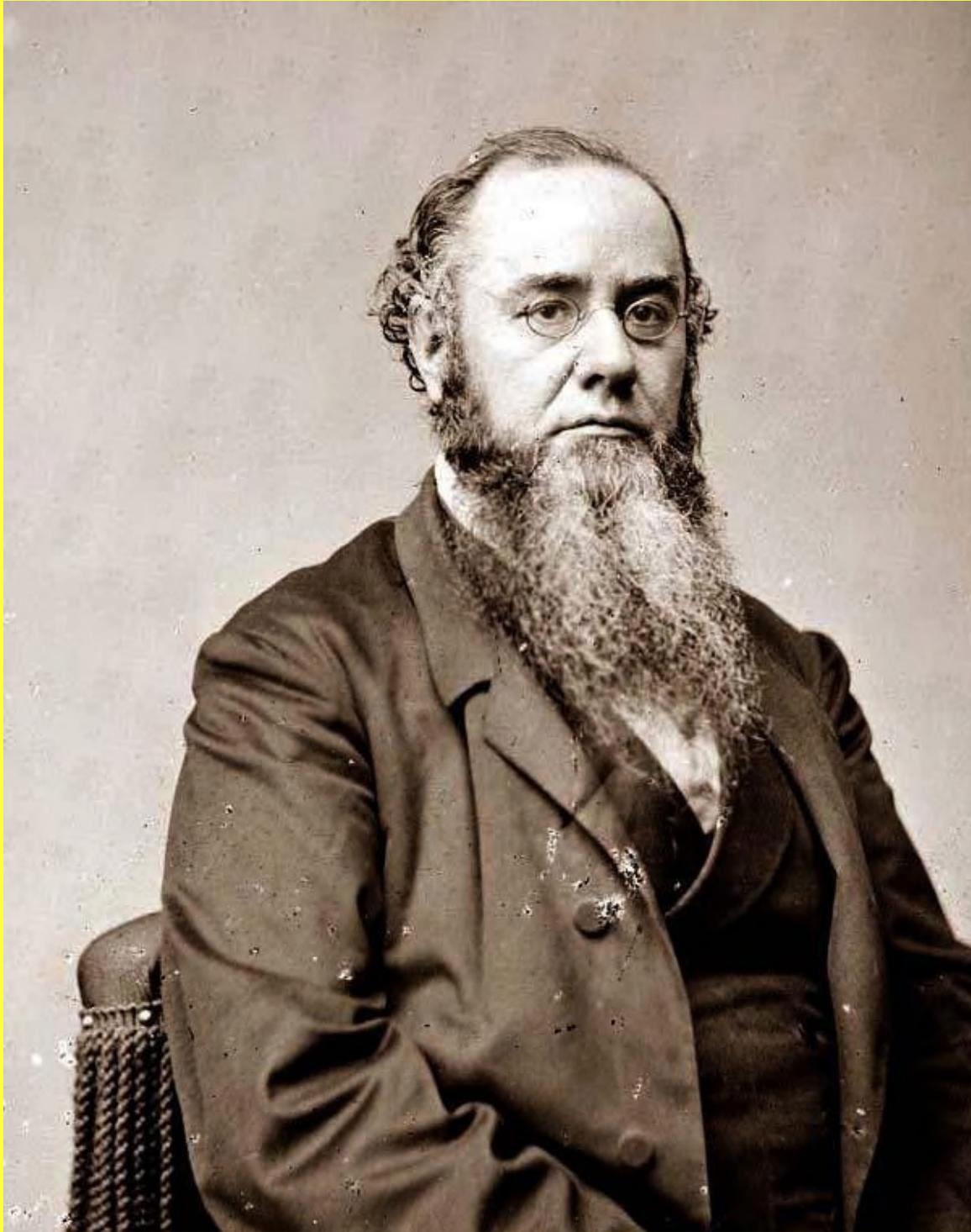
January 31: The 13th amendment, which formally abolished slavery in the United States, passed the Senate on April 8, 1864, and the House on January 31, 1865. On February 1, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln approved the Joint Resolution of Congress submitting the proposed amendment to the state legislatures. The necessary number of states ratified it by December 6, 1865. The 13th amendment to the United States Constitution provides that **"Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."**

In 1863 President Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation declaring "all persons held as slaves within any State, or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free." Nonetheless, the Emancipation Proclamation did not end slavery in the nation. Lincoln recognized that the Emancipation Proclamation would have to be followed by a constitutional amendment in order to guarantee the abolishment of slavery.

The 13th amendment was passed at the end of the Civil War before the Southern states had been restored to the Union and should have easily passed the Congress. Although the Senate passed it in April 1864, the House did not. At that point, Lincoln took an active role to ensure passage through congress. He insisted that passage

of the 13th amendment be added to the Republican Party platform for the upcoming Presidential elections. His efforts met with success when the House passed the bill in January 1865 with a vote of 119–56.

With the adoption of the 13th amendment, the United States found a final constitutional solution to the issue of slavery. The 13th amendment, along with the 14th and 15th, is one of the trio of Civil War amendments that greatly expanded the civil rights of Americans.



General William T. Sherman and the -

On January 11, 1865, United States Secretary of War Edwin Stanton (above photo) arrives in Savannah to meet with Union Gen. William T. Sherman - not over military strategy but rather in

response to concerns over Sherman's treatment of freed blacks. Word has reached the North that during the March to the Sea, a Union general had caused the death of hundreds of freed slaves at Ebenezer Creek, when he ordered the pontoon bridge removed before the former slaves following his army could cross the creek. Few could swim, but rather than be left behind, many jumped in the water and drowned while trying to make to the other side. Also, it was rumored that many of those left behind had been killed by Confederate cavalry. Plus there were other charges. A friend of Sherman's had written him to warn:

"They say you have manifested an almost 'criminal' dislike of the Blacks, and that you are not willing to carry out the wishes of the Government in regard to him, but repulse him with contempt. They say you might have brought with you to Savannah more than 50,000, thus stripping Georgia of that number of laborers, and opening a road by which as many more could have escaped from their masters; but that, instead of this, you drove them from your ranks."

Stanton, a staunch abolitionist, decided to come personally to investigate. He first holds a meeting with Sherman and a group of twenty black ministers. Stanton asked about enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation. Then, he asked Sherman to step out of the room. Stanton asks the ministers about Sherman's actions toward blacks. They clear Sherman, describing him as "a friend and a gentleman" in his treatment of blacks. Stanton recalls Sherman to ask about the Ebenezer Creek tragedy. Sherman excuses the incident as blown out of proportion. No blacks had been turned back, and the general in command removed the bridge simply because he needed to carry it with him. Also, as far as Sherman knew, no freed slaves had been killed by the Confederates. Whether Stanton was convinced is not known, but this ends his investigation.

The New York Times Disunion series gives more detail on this story:

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/16/forty-acres-and-a-mule/>

At 8 PM on January 12, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and Major

General William T. Sherman meet with black religious leaders of Savannah, Georgia, at Sherman's headquarters to discuss the treatment of blacks and what action could be taken to support the newly freed people.

The following story appeared in the February 13, 1865 New York Daily Tribune:

Negroes of Savannah

On the evening of Thursday, the 12th day of January, 1865, the following persons of African descent met by appointment to hold an interview with Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War, and Major-Gen. Sherman, to have a conference upon matters relating to the freedmen of the State of Georgia, to-wit:

One: William J. Campbell, aged 51 years, born in Savannah, slave until 1849, and then liberated by will of his mistress, Mrs. May Maxwell. For ten years pastor of the 1st Baptist Church of Savannah, numbering about 1,800 members. Average congregation, 1,900. The church property belonging to the congregation. Trustees white. Worth \$18,000.

Two: John Cox, aged fifty-eight years, born in Savannah; slave until 1849, when he bought his freedom for \$1,100. Pastor of the 2d African Baptist Church. In the ministry fifteen years. Congregation 1,222 persons. Church property worth \$10,000, belonging to the congregation.

Three: Ulysses L. Houston, aged forty-one years, born in Grahamsville, S.C.; slave until the Union army entered Savannah. Owned by Moses Henderson, Savannah, and pastor of Third African Baptist Church. Congregation numbering 400. Church property worth \$5,000; belongs to congregation. In the ministry about eight years.

Four: William Bentley, aged 72 years, born in Savannah, slave until 25 years of age, when his master, John Waters, emancipated him by will. Pastor of Andrew's Chapel, Methodist Episcopal Church—only one of that denomination in Savannah; congregation numbering 360 members; church property worth about \$20,000, and is owned by the congregation; been in the ministry about

twenty years; a member of Georgia Conference.

Five: Charles Bradwell, aged 40 years, born in Liberty County, Ga.; slave until 1851; emancipated by will of his master, J. L. Bradwell. Local preacher in charge of the Methodist Episcopal congregation (Andrew's Chapel) in the absence of the minister; in the ministry 10 years.

Six: William Gaines, aged 41 years; born in Wills Co., Ga. Slave until the Union forces freed me. Owned by Robert Toombs, formerly United States Senator, and his brother, Gabriel Toombs, local preacher of the M.E. Church (Andrew's Chapel.) In the ministry 16 years.

Seven: James Hill, aged 52 years; born in Bryan Co., Ga. Slave up to the time the Union army came in. Owned by H. F. Willings, of Savannah. In the ministry 16 years.

Eight: Glasgow Taylor, aged 72 years, born in Wilkes County, Ga. Slave until the Union army came; owned by A. P. Wetter. Is a local preacher of the M.E. Church (Andrew's Chapel.) In the ministry 35 years.

Nine: Garrison Frazier, aged 67 years, born in Granville County, N.C. Slave until eight years ago, when he bought himself and wife, paying \$1,000 in gold and silver. Is an ordained minister in the Baptist Church, but, his health failing, has now charge of no congregation. Has been in the ministry 35 years.

Ten: James Mills, aged 56 years, born in Savannah; free-born, and is a licensed preacher of the first Baptist Church. Has been eight years in the ministry.

Eleven: Abraham Burke, aged 48 years, born in Bryan County, Ga. Slave until 20 years ago, when he bought himself for \$800. Has been in the ministry about 10 years.

Twelve: Arthur Wardell, aged 44 years, born in Liberty County, Ga. Slave until freed by the Union army. Owned by A. A. Solomons, Savannah, and is a licensed minister in the Baptist Church. Has been in the ministry 6 years.

Thirteen: Alexander Harris, aged 47 years, born in Savannah; free born. Licensed minister of Third African Baptist Church. Licensed about one month ago.

Fourteen: Andrew Neal, aged 61 years, born in Savannah, slave until the Union army liberated him. Owned by Mr. Wm. Gibbons, and has been deacon in the Third Baptist Church for 10 years.

Fifteen: Jas. Porter, aged 39 years, born in Charleston, South Carolina; free-born, his mother having purchased her freedom. Is lay-reader and president of the board of wardens and vestry of St. Stephen's Protestant Episcopal Colored Church in Savannah. Has been in communion 9 years. The congregation numbers about 200 persons. The church property is worth about \$10,000, and is owned by the congregation.

Sixteen: Adolphus Delmotte, aged 28 years, born in Savannah; free born. Is a licensed minister of the Missionary Baptist Church of Milledgeville. Congregation numbering about 300 or 400 persons. Has been in the ministry about two years.

Seventeen: Jacob Godfrey, aged 57 years, born in Marion, S.C. Slave until the Union army freed me; owned by James E. Godfrey—Methodist preacher now in the Rebel army. Is a class-leader and steward of Andrew's Chapel since 1836.

Eighteen: John Johnson, aged 51 years, born in Bryan County, Georgia. Slave up to the time the Union army came here; owned by W. W. Lincoln of Savannah. Is class-leader and treasurer of Andrew's Chapel for sixteen years.

Nineteen: Robt. N. Taylor, aged 51 years, born in Wilkes Co., Ga. Slave to the time the Union army came. Was owned by Augustus P. Welter, Savannah, and is class-leader in Andrew's Chapel for nine years.

Twenty: Jas. Lynch, aged 26 years, born in Baltimore, Md.; free-born. Is presiding elder of the M.E. Church and missionary to the department of the South. Has been seven years in the ministry and two years in the South.

Garrison Frazier being chosen by the persons present to express

their common sentiments upon the matters of inquiry, makes answers to inquiries as follows:

First: State what your understanding is in regard to the acts of Congress and President Lincoln's [Emancipation] proclamation, touching the condition of the colored people in the Rebel States.

Answer—So far as I understand President Lincoln's proclamation to the Rebellious States, it is, that if they would lay down their arms and submit to the laws of the United States before the first of January, 1863, all should be well; but if they did not, then all the slaves in the Rebel States should be free henceforth and forever. That is what I understood.

Second—State what you understand by Slavery and the freedom that was to be given by the President's proclamation.

Answer—Slavery is, receiving by irresistible power the work of another man, and not by his consent. The freedom, as I understand it, promised by the proclamation, is taking us from under the yoke of bondage, and placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor, take care of ourselves and assist the Government in maintaining our freedom.

Third: State in what manner you think you can take care of yourselves, and how can you best assist the Government in maintaining your freedom.

Answer: The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor—that is, by the labor of the women and children and old men; and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare. And to assist the Government, the young men should enlist in the service of the Government, and serve in such manner as they may be wanted. (The Rebels told us that they piled them up and made batteries of them, and sold them to Cuba; but we don't believe that.) We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own.

Fourth: State in what manner you would rather live—whether scattered among the whites or in colonies by yourselves.

Answer: I would prefer to live by ourselves, for there is a prejudice

against us in the South that will take years to get over; but I do not know that I can answer for my brethren. [Mr. Lynch says he thinks they should not be separated, but live together. All the other persons present, being questioned one by one, answer that they agree with Brother Frazier.]¹

Fifth: Do you think that there is intelligence enough among the slaves of the South to maintain themselves under the Government of the United States and the equal protection of its laws, and maintain good and peaceable relations among yourselves and with your neighbors?

Answer—I think there is sufficient intelligence among us to do so.

Sixth—State what is the feeling of the black population of the South toward the Government of the United States; what is the understanding in respect to the present war—its causes and object, and their disposition to aid either side. State fully your views.

Answer—I think you will find there are thousands that are willing to make any sacrifice to assist the Government of the United States, while there are also many that are not willing to take up arms. I do not suppose there are a dozen men that are opposed to the Government. I understand, as to the war, that the South is the aggressor. President Lincoln was elected President by a majority of the United States, which guaranteed him the right of holding the office and exercising that right over the whole United States. The South, without knowing what he would do, rebelled. The war was commenced by the Rebels before he came into office. The object of the war was not at first to give the slaves their freedom, but the sole object of the war was at first to bring the rebellious States back into the Union and their loyalty to the laws of the United States. Afterward, knowing the value set on the slaves by the Rebels, the President thought that his proclamation would stimulate them to lay down their arms, reduce them to obedience, and help to bring back the Rebel States; and their not doing so has now made the freedom of the slaves a part of the war. It is my opinion that there is not a man in this city that could be started to help the Rebels one inch, for that would be suicide. There were two black men left with the Rebels because they had taken an active part for the Rebels, and thought something might befall them if they stayed behind; but there is not another man. If the prayers that have gone up for the

Union army could be read out, you would not get through them these two weeks.

Seventh: State whether the sentiments you now express are those only of the colored people in the city; or do they extend to the colored population through the country? and what are your means of knowing the sentiments of those living in the country?

Answer: I think the sentiments are the same among the colored people of the State. My opinion is formed by personal communication in the course of my ministry, and also from the thousands that followed the Union army, leaving their homes and undergoing suffering. I did not think there would be so many; the number surpassed my expectation.

Eighth: If the Rebel leaders were to arm the slaves, what would be its effect?

Answer: I think they would fight as long as they were before the bayonet, and just as soon as soon as they could get away, they would desert, in my opinion.

Ninth: What, in your opinion, is the feeling of the colored people about enlisting and serving as soldiers of the United States? and what kind of military service do they prefer?

Answer: A large number have gone as soldiers to Port Royal [S.C.] to be drilled and put in the service; and I think there are thousands of the young men that would enlist. There is something about them that perhaps is wrong. They have suffered so long from the Rebels that they want to shoulder the musket. Others want to go into the Quartermaster's or Commissary's service.

Tenth: Do you understand the mode of enlistments of colored persons in the Rebel States by State agents under the Act of Congress? If yea, state what your understanding is.

Answer: My understanding is, that colored persons enlisted by State agents are enlisted as substitutes, and give credit to the States, and do not swell the army, because every black man enlisted by a State agent leaves a white man at home; and, also, that larger bounties are given or promised by State agents than are

given by the States. The great object should be to push through this Rebellion the shortest way, and there seems to be something wanting in the enlistment by State agents, for it don't strengthen the army, but takes one away for every colored man enlisted.

Eleventh: State what, in your opinion, is the best way to enlist colored men for soldiers.

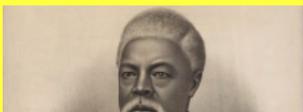
Answer: I think, sir, that all compulsory operations should be put a stop to. The ministers would talk to them, and the young men would enlist. It is my opinion that it would be far better for the State agents to stay at home, and the enlistments to be made for the United States under the direction of Gen. Sherman.

In the absence of Gen. Sherman, the following question was asked:

Twelfth: State what is the feeling of the colored people in regard to Gen. Sherman; and how far do they regard his sentiments and actions as friendly to their rights and interests, or otherwise?

Answer: We looked upon Gen. Sherman prior to his arrival as a man in the Providence of God specially set apart to accomplish this work, and we unanimously feel inexpressible gratitude to him, looking upon him as a man that should be honored for the faithful performance of his duty. Some of us called upon him immediately upon his arrival, and it is probable he would not meet the Secretary with more courtesy than he met us. His conduct and deportment toward us characterized him as a friend and a gentleman. We have confidence in Gen. Sherman, and think that what concerns us could not be under better hands. This is our opinion now from the short acquaintance and interest we have had. (Mr. Lynch states that with his limited acquaintance with Gen. Sherman, he is unwilling to express an opinion. All others present declare their agreement with Mr. Frazier about Gen. Sherman.)

Some conversation upon general subjects relating to Gen. Sherman's march then ensued, of which no note was taken.



Rev. Ulysses L. Houston was the pastor of First Bryan Baptist Church, Savannah, Georgia during 1864. He was born in Hampton County,

South Carolina, February 1825. Brother Ulysses L. Houston was converted to Christ in 1839. He was baptized by Revs. Stephen McQueen and John Deveaux. Shortly, after his conversion to Christ he was chosen as First Bryan Baptist Church Clerk. March 3, 1851 he was elected to the office of deacon. Brother Houston was licensed to preach April 15th, 1855. Ordination to the Gospel Ministry occurred on May 12, 1861. First Bryan Baptist Church called Brother U. L. Houston as their ninth pastor during October of 1861. The Union Army invaded Jasper County, then a part of Beaufort County, South Carolina in 1862 and provided African-Americans a small taste of freedom. Rev. Houston took advantage of this opportunity and organized Bethel Baptist Church in 1864, just prior to the end of the Civil War. In November of 1861, Port Royal harbor was visited by Commodore Dupont and Major General Thomas William Sherman, accompanied by a navy and an army, which caused a general flight of the chivalry and among them were the white members of the Beaufort Baptist Church. By their flight, the body consisted solely of the colored brethren and sisters. Slaves on the outskirts of Beaufort, likewise enjoyed a certain amount of freedom including those in the Black Swamp Community. With the aid of Rev. U. L. Houston, the Bethel Baptist Church was constituted. Other founders include Gideon Indson, Jack Capers, Calvin L. Lawton, Sims Burleson, Daniel Frost, Ephraim Ridgely, James Cuyler, Bryant Cuyler, R. Middlell, J. T. Mackey, G. F. Lawton, and John H. Fair. Bethel Baptist Church then called Reverend U. L. Houston to serve as her first pastor. Reverend Houston and the Bethel Baptist Church were charter members of the first interstate Zion Baptist Association organized July 15, 1865 in South Carolina. He served as chairperson until the association was officially organized. Constituent churches of the Zion Baptist Association included Bethel Baptist and other churches from South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. First African Baptist Church, (Mitchellville) Hilton Head Island, South Carolina constituted during August of 1863 hosted the first Zion Baptist Association. Rev. John Cox, pastor of the Second African Baptist Church, Savannah was elected Moderator.

Shortly after the first session of the Zion Association ended, Reverend Houston resigned as pastor to accommodate his busy schedule. Former Pastor Houston was elected to the Georgia legislature in 1868 and 1870. He also help to organize the George Baptist State Convention.

Rev. Calvin L. Lawton was called and ordained as the second pastor of Bethel Baptist Church in 1865. Reverend Lawton served Bethel Baptist Church well. During 1868 he baptized 13 souls, preached one funeral and restored 41 former members. During 1868 Bethel had 215 members. Pastor and the Officers of the church purchased one square acre of land to build a church on December 21, 1867.

Forty Acres and a Mule -

We've all heard the story of the "40 acres and a mule" promise to former slaves. It's a staple of black history lessons, and it's the name of Spike Lee's film company. The promise was the first systematic attempt to provide a form of reparations to newly freed slaves, and it was astonishingly radical for its time, proto-socialist in its implications. In fact, such a policy would be radical in any country today: the federal government's massive confiscation of private property — some 400,000 acres — formerly owned by Confederate land owners, and its methodical redistribution to former black slaves. What most of us haven't heard is that the idea really was generated by black leaders themselves.

It is difficult to stress adequately how revolutionary this idea was: As the historian Eric Foner puts it in his book, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, "Here in coastal South Carolina and Georgia, the prospect beckoned of a transformation of Southern society more radical even than the end of slavery." Try to imagine how profoundly different the history of race relations in the United States would have been had this policy been implemented and enforced; had the former slaves actually had access to the ownership of land, of property; if they had had a chance to be self-sufficient economically, to build, accrue and pass on wealth. After all, one of the principal promises of America was the possibility of average people being able to own land, and all that such ownership entailed. As we know all too well, this promise was not to be realized for the overwhelming majority of the nation's former slaves, who numbered about 3.9 million.

What was exactly promised?

We have been taught in school that the source of the policy of “40 acres and a mule” was Union General William T. Sherman’s Special Field Order No. 15, issued on Jan. 16, 1865. (That account is half-right: Sherman prescribed the 40 acres in that Order, but not the mule. The mule would come later.) But what many accounts leave out is that this idea for massive land redistribution actually was the result of a discussion that Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton held four days before Sherman issued the Order, with 20 leaders of the black community in Savannah, Ga., where Sherman was headquartered following his famous March to the Sea. The meeting was unprecedented in American history.

Today, we commonly use the phrase “40 acres and a mule,” but few of us have read the Order itself. Three of its parts are relevant here. Section one bears repeating in full: “The islands from Charleston, south, the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering the St. Johns river, Florida, are reserved and set apart for the settlement of the negroes [sic] now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States.”

Section two specifies that these new communities, moreover, would be governed entirely by black people themselves: “... on the islands, and in the settlements hereafter to be established, no white person whatever, unless military officers and soldiers detailed for duty, will be permitted to reside; and the sole and exclusive management of affairs will be left to the freed people themselves ... By the laws of war, and orders of the President of the United States, the negro [sic] is free and must be dealt with as such.”

Finally, section three specifies the allocation of land: “... each family shall have a plot of not more than (40) acres of tillable ground, and when it borders on some water channel, with not more than 800 feet water front, in the possession of which land the military authorities will afford them protection, until such time as they can protect themselves, or until Congress shall regulate their title.”

With this Order, 400,000 acres of land — “a strip of coastline stretching from Charleston, South Carolina, to the St. John’s River in Florida, including Georgia’s Sea Islands and the mainland thirty

miles in from the coast,” as Barton Myers reports — would be redistributed to the newly freed slaves. The extent of this Order and its larger implications are mind-boggling, actually.

Who Came Up With the Idea?

Here’s how this radical proposal — which must have completely blown the minds of the rebel Confederates — actually came about. The abolitionists Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens and other Radical Republicans had been actively advocating land redistribution “to break the back of Southern slaveholders’ power,” as Myers observed. But Sherman’s plan only took shape after the meeting that he and Stanton held with those black ministers, at 8:00 p.m., Jan. 12, on the second floor of Charles Green’s mansion on Savannah’s Macon Street. In its broadest strokes, “40 acres and a mule” was their idea.

Stanton, aware of the great historical significance of the meeting, presented Henry Ward Beecher (Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous brother) a verbatim transcript of the discussion, which Beecher read to his congregation at New York’s Plymouth Church and which the New York Daily Tribune printed in full in its Feb. 13, 1865, edition. Stanton told Beecher that “for the first time in the history of this nation, the representatives of the government had gone to these poor debased people to ask them what they wanted for themselves.” Stanton had suggested to Sherman that they gather “the leaders of the local Negro community” and ask them something no one else had apparently thought to ask: “What do you want for your own people” following the war? And what they wanted astonishes us even today.

Who were these 20 thoughtful leaders who exhibited such foresight? They were all ministers, mostly Baptist and Methodist. Most curious of all to me is that 11 of the 20 had been born free in slave states, of which 10 had lived as free men in the Confederacy during the course of the Civil War. (The other one, a man named James Lynch, was born free in Maryland, a slave state, and had only moved to the South two years before.) The other nine ministers had been slaves in the South who became “contraband,” and hence free, only because of the Emancipation Proclamation, when Union forces liberated them.

Their chosen leader and spokesman was a Baptist minister named Garrison Frazier, aged 67, who had been born in Granville, N.C., and was a slave until 1857, “when he purchased freedom for himself and wife for \$1000 in gold and silver,” as the New York Daily Tribune reported. Rev. Frazier had been “in the ministry for thirty-five years,” and it was he who bore the responsibility of answering the 12 questions that Sherman and Stanton put to the group. The stakes for the future of the Negro people were high.

And Frazier and his brothers did not disappoint. What did they tell Sherman and Stanton that the Negro most wanted? Land! “The way we can best take care of ourselves,” Rev. Frazier began his answer to the crucial third question, “is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor ... and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare ... We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own.” And when asked next where the freed slaves “would rather live — whether scattered among the whites or in colonies by themselves,” without missing a beat, Brother Frazier (as the transcript calls him) replied that “I would prefer to live by ourselves, for there is a prejudice against us in the South that will take years to get over ... ” When polled individually around the table, all but one — James Lynch, 26, the man who had moved south from Baltimore — said that they agreed with Frazier. Four days later, Sherman issued Special Field Order No. 15, after President Lincoln approved it.

What Became of the Land That Was Promised?

The response to the Order was immediate. When the transcript of the meeting was reprinted in the black publication *Christian Recorder*, an editorial note intoned that “From this it will be seen that the colored people down South are not so dumb as many suppose them to be,” reflecting North-South, slave-free black class tensions that continued well into the modern civil rights movement. The effect throughout the South was electric: As Eric Foner explains, “the freedmen hastened to take advantage of the Order.” Baptist minister Ulysses L. Houston, one of the group that had met with Sherman, led 1,000 blacks to Skidaway Island, Ga., where they established a self-governing community with Houston as the “black governor.” And by June, “40,000 freedmen had been settled on 400,000 acres of ‘Sherman Land.’ ” By the way, Sherman later ordered that the army could lend the new settlers mules; hence the

phrase, "40 acres and a mule."

And what happened to this astonishingly visionary program, which would have fundamentally altered the course of American race relations? Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor and a sympathizer with the South, overturned the Order in the fall of 1865, and, as Barton Myers sadly concludes, "returned the land along the South Carolina, Georgia and Florida coasts to the planters who had originally owned it" — to the very people who had declared war on the United States of America.

- By Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Michigan Civil War Sesquicentennial History Partners -

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