

Letter 1

The Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony

Roanoke Island was the setting for an historic experiment during the Civil War. Following the island's occupation by Union forces in 1862, it became a haven for African-American families from throughout the region. Their presence prompted the Union Army to establish a Freedmen's Colony on the northern end of Roanoke Island. This colony, similar to others established by the Union Army, gave African Americans their first tastes of independence and freedom. However, like other sites, it was short-lived and soon faded from the pages of history.

By May 1863, the population situation was so acute that the Federal government seized many local lands and established a formal colony on the island. Major General John G. Foster, commander of the Department of North Carolina, instructed Army chaplain Reverend Horace James as "Superintendent of Blacks in North Carolina" to "settle the colored people on the unoccupied lands and give them agricultural implements and mechanical tools... and to train and educate them for a free and independent community." According to Assistant Superintendent George O. Sanderson, a sergeant with the 43rd Massachusetts Infantry, the Freedmen's Colony was laid out on the north end of the island using "compass, chart and chain, and a gang of choppers" among "the old groves of pine, gum and cypress."

Arriving in October of 1863, Miss Elizabeth James, "a lady sent out by the American Missionary Association," became the first teacher in the community. She worked alone for three months, living in log cabin and working in another until other teachers followed her to the colony.

The Freedmen's Colony on Roanoke Island never became the self-sufficient community its planners envisioned. Its isolation and the transfer into the army of most of the working men made the residents more and more dependent on the government for support. It did, however, provide homes for the families of soldiers, brought education for the first time to the colony's residents, and gave them renewed sense of hope. Furthermore, while most of the freemen returned to the mainland, many descendants still live, work and raise their families on Roanoke Island today. While the Freedmen's Colony is not as well known as another unsuccessful colony on these same shores, its contribution to the betterment of the African American community in particular and American society in general should not be overlooked.

Excerpts taken from Learn NC: The Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony

Letter 2

The Etheridge Letter

[General] We the soldiers of the 36 U.S. Col[ored] Regt Humbly petition to you to alter the Affairs at Roanoke Island. We have served in the US Army faithfully and done our duty to our Country, for which we thank God (that we had the opportunity) but at the same time our family's are suffering at Roanoke Island, N.C.

1 When we were enlisted in the service we were promised that our wives and families should receive rations from government. The rations for our wives and families have been (and are now cut down) to one half the regular ration. Consequently, three or four days out of every ten days, they have nothing to eat. At the same time our rations are stolen from the ration house by Mr. Streeter the Asst. Supt at the Island (and others) and sold while our families are suffering for something to eat.

2nd Mr [Holland] Streeter the Asst Supt of Negro affairs at Roanoke Island is a thorough Cooper head a man who says that he is not part of an Abolitionist. Takes no care of the colored people and has no sympathy with the colored people. A man who kicks our wives and children out of the ration house or commissary, he takes no notice of their actual suffering and sells the rations and allows it to be sold, and our families suffer for something to eat.

3rd Captn [Horace] James the Suptn in Charge has been told of these facts and has taken no notice of them. So has Coln Lahaman [Theodore Lehman of the 103d Pennsylvania] the Commander in Charge of Roanoke, but no notice is taken of it because it comes from Contrabands or Freedmen the cause of much suffering is that Captn James has not paid the colored people for their work for near a year and at the same time cuts the rations off to one half so the people have neither provisions or money to buy it with. There are men on the Island that have wounded at Dutch Gap Canal, working there and some discharged soldiers men that were wounded in the service of the US Army and returned home to Roanoke that cannot get any rations and are not able to work, some soldiers are sick in Hospitals that have never been paid a cent and their families are suffering and their children going crying without anything to eat.

4th our families have no protection the white soldiers break into our houses act as they please steal our chickens rob our gardens and if any one defends their-selves against them they are taken to the house for it. So our families have no protection when Mr. Streeter is here to protect them and will not do it.

5th General we the soldiers of the 36 U.S. Co Troops having families at Roanoke Island humbly petition you to favour us by removing Mr. Streeter the present Asst Supt at Roanoke Island under Captn James.

General perhaps you think the Statements against Mr. Streeter too strong, but we can prove them.

General order Chaplain Green to Washington to report the true state of things at Roanoke Island. Chaplain Green is an asst. Supt at Roanoke Island, with Mr Holland Streeter and he can prove the facts. And there are plenty of white men here that prove them also, and many more thinkgs not mentioned.

Signed on behalf of humanity

Richard Etheridge

Wm Benson

[Sergt Richard Etheridge and Wm Benson to Genl Howard, {May or June 1865}, Office of the Assistant Commissioner of North Carolina. Letters Received, Record Group 105 Series 2453, Microfilm 843, reel 16, National Archives]

Letter 3

“What we are in justice entitled to”

Letter from Jourdan Anderson to P.H. Anderson, August 7, 1865. Published in the Cincinnati Commercial and reprinted in the New York Tribune, August 22, 1865.

Dayton, Ohio, August 7, 1865 To My Old Master, Colonel P.H. Anderson, Big Spring Tennessee

Sir: I got your letter and was glad to find you had not forgotten Jourdon, and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anybody else can. I have often felt uneasy about you. I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this for harboring Rebs they found at your house. I suppose they never heard about your going to Col. Martin's to kill the Union soldier that was left by his company in their stable. Although you shot at me twice before I left you, I did not want to hear of your being hurt, and am glad you are still living. It would do me good to go back to the dear old home again and see Miss Mary and Miss Martha and Allen, Esther, Green and Lee. Give my love to them all, and tell them I hope we will meet in the better world, if not in this. I would have gone back to see you all when I was working in the Nashville Hospital, but one of the neighbors told me Henry intended to shoot me if he ever got a chance.

I want to know particularly what the good chance is you propose to give me. I am doing tolerable well here; I get \$25 a month, with victuals and clothing; have a comfortable home for Mandy (the folks here call her Mrs. Anderson), and the children, Milly, Jane and Grundy go to school and are learning well; the teacher says Grundy has a head for a preacher. They go to Sunday-School and Mandy and me attend church regularly. We are kindly treated; sometimes we overhear others saying, “The colored people were slaves” down in Tennessee. The children feel hurt when they hear such remarks, but I tell them it was no disgrace in Tennessee to belong to Col. Anderson. Many darkies would have been proud, as I used to was to call you master. Now, if you will write and say what wages you will give me, I will be better able to decide whether it would be to my advantage to move back again.

As to my freedom, which you say I can have, there is nothing to be gained on that score, as I got my free papers in 1864 from the Provost-Marshal-General of the Department of Nashville. Mandy says she would be afraid to go back without some proof that you sincerely disposed to treat us justly and kindly-and we have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. This will make us forget and forgive old scores and rely on your justice and friendship in the future. I served you faithfully for thirty two years and Mandy for twenty years. At \$25 a month for me and \$2 a week for Mandy our earnings would amount to \$11,680. Add to this interest for the time our wages has been kept back and deduct what you paid

for our clothing and three doctor's visits to me, and pulling a tooth for a Mandy and the balance will should what we are in justice entitled to. Please send the money by Adams Express in care of V. Winters, esq. Dayton, Ohio. If you fail to pay us for faithful labors in the past we can have little faith in your promises in the future. We trust the good Maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers, in making us toil for you generations without recompense. Here I draw my wages every Saturday night, but in Tennessee there was never any pay day for the Negroes any more than for the horses and cows. Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the laborer for his hire.