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Sherman, Savannah, and the Negro

by

Blanton E. Black

This monograph relates to an intriguing and little publicized facet of the history of the Civil War, namely, the proposed experiment of General W. T. Sherman in 1865 of establishing the freed Negroes in self-sufficient reservations in the coastal area of South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida.

Issued as Special Field Orders, No. 15, Headquarters Military Division of the Mississippi, In the Field, Savannah, Georgia, January 16, 1865, excerpts follow :

1. 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. John's, Florida, are reserved and set apart for the settlement of the negroes now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States.

2. At Beaufort, Hilton Head, Savannah, Fernandina, St. Augustine, and Jacksonville, the blacks may remain in their chosen or accustomed vocations; but 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, subject only to the United States military authority, and the acts of Congress . . .

3. Whenever three respectable negroes, heads of families, shall desire to settle on land, and shall have selected for that purpose an island or a locality clearly defined within the limits above designated, the Inspector of Settlements and Plantations will himself, or by such subordinate officer as he may appoint, give them a license to settle such island or district, and afford them such assistance as he can enable them to establish a peaceful agricultural settlement . . . each family shall have a plot of not more than forty acres of tillable ground, and, when it borders on some water-channel, with not more than eight hundred 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.

4. Whenever a negro has enlisted in the military service of the United States, he may locate his family in any one of the settlements at pleasure, and acquire a homestead, and all other rights and privileges of a settler, as though present in person.

5. In order to carry out this system of settlement, a general officer will be detailed as Inspector of Settlements and Plantations. The same general officer will be charged with the enlistment and organization of the negro recruits, and protecting their interests while absent from their settlements . . .

6. Brigadier-General R. Saxton is hereby appointed Inspector of Settlements and Plantations, and will at once enter on the performance of his duties.

By order of Major-General W. T. Sherman
L. M. Dayton, Assistant Adjutant-General

This remarkable document is quoted in the 1885 edition of **Memoirs of General William T. Sherman. By Himself** Vol II (pp 250-252). Herein is an extraordinary compilation of descriptions of military engagements, official correspondence, and personal reflections published by D. Appleton and Company. Long since out of print, these **Memoirs** exemplify an elegance of diction and clarity of expression that distinguish the General as of uncommon literary talent.

To say the least, General Sherman is a controversial figure; for, by some he is described as cruel and vindictive, cold-blooded and merciless; by others he is extolled as humanitarian and liberator of those who were in bondage. Without a doubt, with reference to tactics resorted to in his march through Georgia from Atlanta to Savannah, he looms as the nineteenth century precursor of this century's philosophy of total war and scorched-earth policy.

And yet, was Sherman in his all-consuming desire to save the Union dedicated to the task of freeing the Negro? For an answer, the objective historian is impelled to search for hidden clues amidst the skillful wordage of his free-flowing prose.

An inkling as to General Sherman's attitude toward the Negro is suggested in his account of demolition procedure in the vicinity of Atlanta (**Memoirs**, p. 105):

The track was heaved up in sections the length of a regiment, then separated rail by rail; bonfires were made of the tires and the fence-rails on which the rails were heated, carried to trees or telegraph-poles, wrapped around and left to cool. Such rails could not be used again; and, to be still more certain, we filled up many cuts with trees, brush, and earth, and commingled with them loaded shells, so arranged that they would explode on an attempt to haul out the brushes. The explosion of one such shell would have demoralized a gang of negroes, and thus would have prevented even the attempt to clear the road.

General J. B. Hood, commanding the Confederate forces in Atlanta on September 12, 1864, wrote a letter to General Sherman protesting the conditions of surrender the

forced removal of the civilian populations. Further protest also included denunciation of General Sherman for using Negro troops (**Memoirs** p. 123) :

You came into our country with your army, avowedly for the purpose of subjugating free white men, women, and children, and not only intended to rule over them, but you make negroes your allies, and desire to place over us an inferior race . . .

Better die a thousand deaths than submit to live under your Government and your negro allies.

Upon receiving this letter, Sherman, evidently filled with indignation, replied to General Wood in the following manner (**Memoirs**, September 14, 1864. p. 127) :

We have no "negro allies" in this army; not a single negro soldier left Chattanooga with this army, or is with it now.

Here is clear evidence of the General's negative, if not derogatory, estimate of Negro Militia. In a letter to the Mayor and City Council of Atlanta (**Memoirs**, pp. 125-126), the General asserts:

We don't want your negroes, or your horses, or your houses, or your lands, or anything you have, but we do want and we will have a just obedience to the laws of the United States.

Sherman expressed pity for the slaves who felt that the war was being fought for their freedom. This, to the General, was a misapprehension attributable to the Negro's child-like lack of understanding. Clarifying this point of view, he relates the following incident which occurred November 17, 1864, during his march from Atlanta to Savannah. On a plantation near Covington, Georgia, the General questioned an elderly Negro of visible and superior intelligence:

"I asked him if he understood about the war and its progress. He said he did; that he had been looking for the 'angel of the Lord' ever since he was knee-high, and, **though we professed to be fighting for the Union, he supposed that slavery was the cause**, and that our success was to be his freedom. I asked him if all the negro slaves comprehended this fact, and he said they surely did." (**Memoirs**, pp. 180-181).

General Sherman then proceeded to explain that he wanted the slaves to remain where they were so that his army would not be overloaded with useless mouths to be fed. Two Special Field Orders issued at the command of General Sherman on November 8 and 9 of 1864 emphasized his consideration of the slaves as so much troublesome encumbrance. Special Field Orders No. 119:

. . . All surplus servants, noncombatants, and refugees, should now go to the rear, and none should be encouraged to encumber us on the march. At some future time

we will be able to provide for the poor whites and blacks who seek to escape the bondage under which they are now suffering (*Memoirs*, p. 174).

In spite of the efforts made to discourage the slaves from following in the wake of Sherman's army, a great number followed just the same. On December 13, 1864, in a letter to Hon. E. M. Stanton, Secretary of War, Washington, D. C., General Sherman wrote:

We reached Savannah three days ago . . . we can go ahead . . . We have not lost a wagon on the trip, but have gathered a large supply of negroes, mules, horses, etc. and our teams are in far better condition than when we started.

My first duty will be to clear the army of surplus negroes, mules and horses (*Memoirs*, p. 201).

Even in the moment of General Sherman's triumphant acclaim for his successful raid through Georgia, powerful political forces having great influence with President Lincoln were making serious charges against the General: namely, (1) he manifested almost a criminal dislike for the Negro, and (2) he was not willing to carry out Mr. Lincoln's program of extending the blanket of emancipation immediately to all Negroes.

In a letter appraising him of dissatisfaction in Washington, Major General Halleck wrote December 30, 1864:

They say you might have brought with you to Savannah more than fifty thousand, thus stripping Georgia of that number of laborers, and opening a road by which as many more could have escaped from their masters (*Memoirs*, p. 248).

The seriousness of the alleged defection of the General was pointed up by the arrival in Savannah of E. M. Stanton, Secretary of War, on January 11, 1864. Five days later, Special Field Orders, No. 15, representing the combined planning of General Sherman and Secretary Stanton was issued.

One does not hesitate to surmise that the guiding hand behind the overall plan was that of President Abraham Lincoln to whom both General Sherman and Secretary Stanton were accountable. Alas, on that dire 14th of April, Lincoln was assassinated; and five days earlier at Appomattox the war ended with Lee surrendering to Grant; this alone arrested Sherman's northward march of devastation.

Within the same year, President Andrew Johnson began a futile though heroic effort to heal the breach and to resolidify that which must inexorably remain fluid amidst the heat of progress.

Hidden within the pages of James D. Richardson's compilation of the *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, Vol VI (pp. 350-351) are Special Orders, No. 503 and General Orders, No. 145 attributable to the administration of Andrew

Johnson. These irrevocably rescinded the idea and plan of reservations for the freedmen.

Special Orders, No. 503

War Department
Adjutant-General's Office
Washington, September 19, 1865

It has been represented to the Department that commanders of military posts and districts in Georgia . . . have assumed to decide questions of contracts and conflicting claims of property between individuals, and to order the delivery, surrender, or transfer of property and documents of title as between private persons, in which the Government is not concerned.

All such acts and proceedings on the part of military authorities in said State are declared by the President to be without authority and null and void . . .

By order of the President of the United States.

E. D. Townsend,
Assistant Adjutant-General.

General Orders, No. 145

War Department
Adjutant-General's Office
Washington, October 9, 1865

Whereas certain tracts of land, situated on the coast of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida, at the time for the most part vacant, were set apart by Major-General W. T. Sherman's special field order No. 15 for the benefit of refugees and freedmen that have congregated by the operations of war or had been left to take care of themselves by their former owners; and

Whereas an expectation was thereby created that they would be able to retain possession of said lands; and

Whereas a large number of the former owners are earnestly soliciting the restoration of the same and promising to absorb the labor and care for the freedmen:

It is ordered that Major-General Howard, Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, proceed to the several above-named States and endeavor to effect an arrangement mutually satisfactory to the freedmen and the landowners, and make report. And in case a mutually satisfactory arrangement can be effected, he is duly empowered and directed to issue such orders as may become necessary after a full and careful investigation of the interests of the parties concerned.

By order of the President of the United States:

E. D. Townsend,
Assistant Adjutant-General.