

1-1-1865

Ames, Mary - A New England Woman's Diary in Dixie in 1865

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A NEW ENGLAND WOMAN'S DIARY IN DIXIE
IN 1865
by Mary Ames

In October Mr Alden was told to bring the people together that General Howard might talk to them about their future. On the nineteenth a cavalcade of twenty negroes, mounted on horses and mules of all kinds and sizes rushed down to the landing, and formed two

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lines, through which General Saxton and General Howard, with the other gentlemen, passed, receiving the horsemen's salute.

The church was crowded. General Howard, in simple words, said that he, being their friend, had been sent by the President to tell them that the owners of the land, their old masters, had been pardoned, and their plantations were to be given back to them; that they wanted to come back to cultivate the land, and would hire the blacks to work for them.

At first the people could not understand, but as the meaning struck them, that they must give up their little homes and gardens, and work again

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for others, there was a general murmur of dissatisfaction. General Howard's task grew more painful. He begged them to lay aside their bitter feelings, and to become reconciled to their old masters. We heard murmurs of "No, never." "Can't do it." General Howard proposed that three men be chosen to represent the people, to consult and report to him.

Meantime they were asked to sing, and burst forth with "Nobody knows the trouble I see," and "Wandering in the wilderness of sorrow and gloom." Two of the largest owners came down with General Howard. Many of their old slaves were in the church. It was touching to see them saying, "How dy"

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to each other. The gentlemen also felt it. Tears were in their eyes. One of them made a long address.

Still the negroes would not trust them or their promises, declaring that they never could work again "for the Secesh." One said "It was very distressful." Another that he could forgive his old master, as he hoped to be forgiven, but he had lived all his life with a basket over his head, and now that it had been taken off and air and sunlight had come to him, he could not consent to have the basket over him again. It was a hard day for them, poor creatures.

The committee came back after some time, saying they could come to no

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decision, they were too much shaken to see things clearly.

A few days later, they drew up the following petition to the President:

DEAR PRESIDENT JOHNSON

OF THE UNITED STATES

Wee the freedmen of South Carolina wish to adress you with a few lines Conserving the sad feelings that is now resting upon our minds wee pray that god may guive you helth & good spurets that when you receive theas few notasis that you may receive them as the father did the prodical son wee have for the last four yars ben studing with justis and the best of our ability what step wee should

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take to become a people: wee have learnt to respect all Just Causes that ever came from the union.

“Mag genrl howard has paid the freedmen of South Carlinah a visit & caled a meating on Edisto Island South Carliner in the Centrel part of the island at the priskle Church thair hee beautifly addressed the freedmen of this island after his adress a grate many of the peple understanding what was said they got aroused & awoke to perfect sense to stody for them Selves what part of this law would rest against us, wee said in rafarence to what he said that nothing did apier at that time to bee very oppressing upon us but the one thing that is wee freedmen should

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work for wages for our former oners
or eny other man president Johnson
of u st I do say . . . man that have
stud upon the feal of battle & have
shot there master & sons now Going
to ask ether one for bread or for shelter
or Comfortable for his wife & children
sunch a thing the u st should not
ought to Expect a man (to do) . . .”

Continuing, they said: “the King
of south Carolina ask the Privalage to
have the stage that he might a Dress
the ordenance [audience] of the freed-
men . . .”

This was the beginning of a scorch-
ing arraignment of the “old master,”
who had spoken at the meeting, who
pretended to “such a fealing to Com-

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ply with the best order & also what was the best for the freedmen. . . .”
“Here is Plenty Whidow & Fatherles that have serve you as slave now losen a home,” and they beg that you “give Each one of them a acres & a $\frac{1}{2}$ to a family as you has the labers & the Profet of there Yearly [early] Youth.”
And when “the Questin was asked him by General Howard, what would it sell your lan for a acres his anser the I would not take a hunderd \$100 of a acres that is a part of his union fealing so then we therefore lose fate [faith] in this southern Gentelman”
And then they beseech “the wise presi-don that sets on his seat” to give them
“a Chance to Recover out of this

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trubble," . . . "these 3 Committee has Pleg the Trough to you dis day. Oct. 25 1865."

All of us at headquarters were invited to dine on Christmas with Captain and Mrs. Towles, and their friends on Wadmelow Island. It was a foggy morning, and we were not in the best of spirits. Four of the soldiers rowed us in a pontoon. The dinner of wild turkey, etc., was excellent. The ladies who were asked to meet us, and whom we liked, had been sent out by the Philadelphia Society.

Captain Towles had got a fiddle and an old negro to play it, and insisted upon our dancing, because it was