Excerpt from Memoir of Thomas W. Knox
1865

Thomas W. Knox was a Northern journalist who moved to Natchez, Mississippi, after emancipation to try leasing a cotton plantation. Partnering with another journalist, he took over an abandoned plantation and sought to raise cotton with the use of freed black laborers who had been enslaved there. In a memoir entitled *Camp-Fire and Cotton-Field,* he reported on the "free labor" experiment to Northern readers.

On each of the plantations the negroes were at work in the cotton-field. I rode from one to the other, as circumstances made it necessary, and observed the progress that was made. I could easily perceive they had been accustomed to performing their labor under fear of the lash. Some of them took advantage of the opportunity for carelessness and loitering under the new arrangement. I could not be in the field at all times, to give them my personal supervision. Even if I were constantly present, there was now no lash to be feared. I saw that an explanation of the new state of affairs would be an advantage to all concerned. On the first Sunday of my stay on the plantation, I called all the negroes together, in order to give them an understanding of their position.

I made a speech that I adapted as nearly as possible to the comprehension of my hearers. My audience was attentive throughout. I made no allusions to Homer, Dante, or Milton; I did not quote from Gibbon or Macaulay, and I neglected to call their attention to the spectacle they were presenting to the crowned heads of Europe. I explained to them the change the war had made in their condition, and the way in which it had been effected. I told them that all cruel modes of punishment had been abolished. The negroes were free, but they must understand that freedom did not imply idleness. I read to them the regulations established by the commissioners, and explained each point as clearly as I was able. After I had concluded, I offered to answer any questions they might ask.

There were many who could not understand why, if they were free, they should be restricted from going where they pleased at all times. I explained that it was necessary, for the successful management of the plantation, that I should always be able to rely upon them. I asked them to imagine my predicament if they should lose half their time, or go away altogether, in the busiest part of the season. They "saw the point" at once, and readily acknowledged the necessity of subordination.

I found no one who imagined that his freedom conferred the right of idleness and vagrancy. All expected to labor in their new condition, but they expected compensation for their labor, and did not look

for punishment. They expected, further, that their families would not be separated, and that they could be allowed to acquire property for themselves. I know there were many negroes in the South who expected they would neither toil nor spin after being set free, but the belief was by no means universal. [. . .]

The schedule of wages, as established by the commissioners, was read and explained. The negroes were to be furnished with house-rent, rations, fuel, and medical attendance, free of charge. Able-bodied males were to receive eight dollars a month. Other classes of laborers would be paid according to the proportionate value of their services. We were required to keep on hand a supply of clothing, shoes, and other needed articles, which would be issued as required and charged on account. All balances would be paid as soon as the first installment of the cotton crop was sent to market.

This was generally satisfactory, though some of the negroes desired weekly or monthly payments. One of them thought it would be better if they could be paid at the end of each day, and suggested that silver would be preferable to greenbacks or Confederate money. Most of them thought the wages good enough, but this belief was not universal. One man, seventy years old, who acted as assistant to the "hog-minder," thought he deserved twenty-five dollars per month, in addition to his clothing and rations. Another, of the same age, who carried the breakfast and dinner to the field, was of similar opinion. . . .

For the men we had purchased "gray denims" and "Kentucky jeans;" for the women, "blue denims" and common calico. These articles were rapidly taken, and with them the necessary quantity of thread, buttons, etc. A supply of huge bandana kerchiefs for the head was eagerly called for. I had procured as many of these articles as I thought necessary for the entire number of negroes on the plantation; but found I had sadly miscalculated. The kerchiefs were large and very gaudy, and the African taste was at once captivated by them. Instead of being satisfied with one or two, every negro desired from six to a dozen, and was much disappointed at the refusal. The gaudy colors of most of the calicoes created a great demand, while a few pieces of more subdued appearance were wholly discarded. White cotton cloth, palm-leaf hats, knives and forks, tin plates, pans and dishes, and other articles for use or wear, were among the distributions of the day.

Under the slave-owner's rule, the negro was entitled to nothing beyond his subsistence and coarse clothing. Out of a large-hearted generosity the master gave him various articles, amounting, in the course of a year, to a few dollars in value. These articles took the name of "presents," and their reception was designed to inspire

feelings of gratitude in the breast of the slave.

Most of the negroes understood that the new arrangements made an end of present-giving. They were to be paid for all their labor, and were to pay for whatever they received. When the plan was first announced, all were pleased with it; but when we came to the distribution of the goods, many of the negroes changed their views. They urged that the clothing, and every thing else we had purchased, should be issued as "presents," and that they should be paid for their labor in addition. Whatever little advantages the old system might have, they wished to retain and ingraft upon their new life. To be compensated for labor was a condition of freedom which they joyfully accepted. To receive "presents" was an apparent advantage of slavery which they did not wish to set aside.

The matter was fully explained, and I am confident all our auditors understood it. Those that remained obstinate had an eye to their personal interests. Those who had been sick, idle, absent, or disabled, were desirous of liberal gifts, while the industrious were generally in favor of the new system, or made no special opposition to it. [. . .]

A difficulty arose on account of certain promises that had been made to the negroes by the owner of the plantation, long before our arrival. Mrs. B. had told them (according to their version) that the proceeds of the cotton on the plantation should be distributed in the form of presents, whenever a sale was effected. She did not inform us of any such promise when we secured the lease of the plantation. If she made any agreement to that effect, it was probably forgotten. Those who claimed that this arrangement had been made desired liberal presents in addition to payment for their labor. Our non-compliance with this demand was acknowledged to be just, but it created considerable disappointment.

One who had been her mistress's favorite argued the question with an earnestness that attracted my attention. Though past sixty years of age, she was straight as an arrow, and her walk resembled that of a tragedy queen. In her whole features she was unlike those around her, except in her complexion, which was black as ink. There was a clear, silvery tone to her voice, such as I have rarely observed in persons of her race. In pressing her claim, she grew wonderfully eloquent, and would have elicited the admiration of an educated audience. Had there been a school in that vicinity for the development of histrionic talent in the negro race, I would have given that woman a recommendation to its halls.