

Letter to O. O. Howard

Committee of Freedmen on Edisto Island

October 20-21, 1865

This document is a letter to a Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner General Oliver O. Howard from a committee of recently freed men on Edisto Island, South Carolina. Each member of the committee signed his own name, but the petition appears to be in Henry Bram's handwriting. An undated endorsement referred the petition to General Howard, "By order of the President," who was then Andrew Johnson.

General It Is with painfull Hearts that we the committe address you, we Have thoroughly considered the order which you wished us to Sighn, we wish we could do so but cannot feel our rights Safe If we do so,*

General we want Homestead's; we were promised Homestead's by the government,[†] If It does not carry out the promises Its agents made to us, If the government Haveing concluded to befriend Its late enemies and to neglect to observe the principles of common faith between Its self and us Its allies In the war you said was over, now takes away from them all right to the soil they stand upon save such as they can get by again working for *your* late and thier *all time enemies*.—If the government does so we are left In a more unpleasant condition than our former

we are at the mercy of those who are combined to prevent us from getting land enough to lay our Fathers bones upon. We Have property In Horses, cattle, carriages, & articles of furniture, but we are landless and Homeless, from the Homes we Have lived In In the past we can only do one of three things Step Into the public *road or the sea* or remain on them working as In former time and subject to thire will as then. We can not resist It In any way without being driven out Homeless upon the road.

You will see this Is not the condition of really freemen

You ask us to forgive the land owners of our Island, *You* only lost your right arm. In war and might forgive them. The man who tied me to a tree & gave me 39 lashes & who stripped and flogged my mother & my sister & who will not let me stay In His empty Hut except I will do His planting & be Satisfied with His price & who combines with others to keep away land from me well knowing I would not Have any thing to do with Him If I Had land of my own.—that man, I cannot well forgive. Does It look as If He Has forgiven me, seeing How He tries to keep me In a condition of Helplessness

General, we cannot remain Here In such condition and If the government permits them to come back we ask It to Help us to reach

* On October 19, General Howard had telegraphed as follows to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton: "I met several hundred of the colored people of Edisto island to-day, and did my utmost to reconcile them to the surrender of the lands to former owners. They will submit, but with evident sorrow, to the breaking of the promise of General Sherman's order. The greatest aversion is exhibited to making contracts, and they beg and plead for the privilege of renting or buying land on the island. My task is a hard one, and I am convinced that something must be done to give these people and others the prospect of homesteads."

[†] The Committee refers here to a promise made by General William Tecumseh Sherman when he occupied the islands at the beginning of 1865.

land where we shall not be slaves nor compelled to work for those
who would treat us as such

45 we Have not been treacherous, we Have not for selfish motives
allied to us those who suffered like us from a common enemy & then
Haveing gained *our* purpose left our allies In thier Hands There Is
no rights secured to us there Is no law likely to be made which our
Hands can reach. The state will make laws that we shall not be able
50 to Hold land even If we pay for It Landless, Homeless. Voteless. we
can only pray to god & Hope for *His Help, your Infuence & assistance*
With consideration of esteem your Obt Servts

In behalf of the people

Henry Bram
55 Committe Ishmael Moultrie
yates Sampson

Reply from Gen. O. O. Howard

Charleston. S.C. Oct 22, 1865.

Messrs. I have just received your letter. You are right *in wanting*
60 *homesteads* and will *surely be defended in the possession of every one*
which you shall purchase or have already purchased. The Govern-
ment does not wish to befriend its enemies and injure its friends, but
considers a forgiven man in the light of a citizen restored to rights
of property excepting as to slaves. The Supervisory Board must not
65 permit what you fear. The old master would be very foolish to try
a system of oppression as it would ruin them forever now that you
are free. If the planters combine as you think, they will soon be able
to get no labor. Their whipping post of which you complain is abol-
ished forever. The duty of forgiveness is plain and simple. Forgive as
70 we hope to be forgiven of Him who governs all things.

Congress must meet before any public lands can be had and be-
fore I can buy any for you. I will ask for your rights and try to obtain
them. A contract may be by a lease as well as for wages, So that I do
not think the Planters will object to leasing you land. Some can lease,
75 some can buy and some can work for wages. I advise the sending to
you of Northern men for Agents of the owners where true men can
be found.

I think the people had better enter into contracts, leasing or for
wages or purchase when possible for next year. If it dont work
80 well something else may be tried afterwards. Send your petition
to Congress, if you wish, and I will see that it is not passed by with-
out proper attention. The President himself will urge something in
your behalf. Very Truly Yours

O. O. Howard

85 *Reply by the Committee to President Andrew Johnson*

Edisto Island S.C. Oct 28th 1865.

We the freedmen Of Edisto Island South Carolina have learned
 From you through Major General O O Howard commissioner of
 the Freedmans Bureau. with deep sorrow and Painful hearts of the
 90 possibility of government restoring These lands to the former own-
 ers. We are well aware Of the many perplexing and trying questions
 that burden Your mind. and do therefore pray to god (the preserver
 Of all. and who has through our Late and beloved President (Lin-
 coln) proclamation and the war made Us A free people) that he may
 95 guide you in making Your decisions. and give you that wisdom that
 Cometh from above to settle these great and Important Questions for
 the best interests of the country and the Colored race: Here is where
 secession was born and Nurtured Here is were we have toiled nearly
 all Our lives as slaves and were treated like dumb Driven cattle, This
 100 is our home, we have made These lands what they are. we were the
 only true and Loyal people that were found in posession of these
 Lands. we have been always ready to strike for Liberty and human-
 ity yea to fight if needs be To preserve this glorious union. Shall not
 we who Are freedman and have been always true to this Union have
 105 the same rights as are enjoyed by Others? Have we broken any Law
 of these United States? Have we forfeited our rights of property In
 Land?— If not then! are not our rights as A free people and good
 citizens of these United States To be considered before the rights of
 those who were Found in rebellion against this good and just Gover-
 110 nment (and now being conquered) come (as they Seem) with penitent
 hearts and beg forgiveness For past offences and also ask if thier
 lands Cannot be restored to them are these rebellious Spirits to be
 reinstated in thier *possessions* And we who have been abused and
 oppressed For many long years not to be allowed the Privilege of pur-
 115 chasing land But be subject To the will of these large Land owners?
 God fobid, Land monopoly is injurious to the advancement of the
 course of freedom, and if government Does not make some provision
 by which we as Freedmen can obtain A Homestead, we have Not
 bettered our condition.

120 We have been encouraged by government to take up these lands
 in small tracts, receiving Certificates of the same— we have thus far
 Taken Sixteen thousand (16000) acres of Land here on This Island.
 We are ready to pay for this land When Government calls for it. and
 now after What has been done will the good and just government
 125 take from us all this right and make us Subject to the will of those
 who have cheated and Oppressed us for many years God Forbid! We
 the freedmen of this Island and of the State of South Carolina—Do

therefore petition to you as the President of these United States, that
 some provisions be made by which Every colored man can purchase
 130 land. and Hold it as his own. We wish to have A home if It be but
 A few acres. without some provision is Made our future is sad to
 look upon. yes our Situation is dangerous. we therefore look to you
 In this trying hour as A true friend of the poor and Neglected race.
 for protection and Equal Rights. with the privilege of purchasing A
 135 Homestead—A Homestead right here in the Heart of South Carolina.

We pray that god will direct your heart in Making such provision
 for us as freedmen which Will tend to unite these states together
 stronger Than ever before— May God bless you in the Adminis-
 tration of your duties as the President Of these United States is the
 140 humble prayer Of us all.—

In behalf of the Freedmen
 Henry Bram.
 Committee Ishmael. Moultrie.
 yates. Sampson.