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Laura Towne

April 1862

After the the Union army occupied the Sea Islands of South Carolina early in the war, a small group of Northerners came to the coast to attempt to restart cotton cultivation on the islands with wage labor. Laura Towne—who was assigned to start a school for freedpeople—accompanied these cotton agents and wrote about how freedpeople in the area reacted to the new arrangements.

April 18, 1862 — Friday.

When I said something to Mr. Pierce about not wishing to interfere with the system, he answered, " Oh, Miss Towne, we have no systems here."* He spoke playfully, but I think there is truth in it. The teachers who came down here with us have not yet got to work and are going about, not knowing their destination. When we came, Mr. Pierce sent us here to Mrs. Forbes without any invitation from her and has left us here since without knowing her wishes about it. She has nothing to do with the Commission and should not be troubled with its affairs, which makes it uncomfortable for Mr. Philbrick and me.† . . .

There has been a little rebellion upon Mr. Philbrick's plantation (the old Coffin plantation). Two men, one upon each estate, refuse to work the four hours a day they are required to give to the cotton, but insist upon cultivating their own cornpatch only. They threaten, if unprovided with food, to break into the corn-house. One man drew his knife upon his driver, but crouched as soon as Mr. Philbrick laid his hand upon his shoulder. Mr. Philbrick came to Beaufort and has taken back a corporal and two soldiers to arrest and guard these men for a few days. The negroes, Mr. Philbrick says, are docile generally and require the positive ordering that children of five or ten years of age require, but are far more afraid of any white man than of their drivers.

* Edward Pierce had been the superintendent of "contraband" slaves at Fortress Monroe until January 1862, when he was sent to oversee "contrabands" on the Sea Islands.

† Edward Philbrick was the assistant superintendent of the Boston & Worcester Railroad and one of several Northern investors who sought, during the Civil War, to set up a model free-labor experiment for growing cotton in the Sea Islands.

April 24, 1862.

The question of to-day is how to dispose of the clothing to the poor people. They are willing to buy generally, but the supply is too small to admit of selling all they want. . . .

They say, "Gov'ment is fighting for us and we will work for Gov'ment. We don't ask money; we only ask clothes and salt and sweetins." They express the greatest love for the Yankees.

We ladies are borrowed, to go talk to the negroes, from one plantation to another, and we do good, great good. If I only had time to tell all they say to me! Or how they come thronging here for clothes and go away "too satisfied—too thank," one woman said, at receiving some few things—generally, too, second-hand—some of it miserable. . . .

The cotton agents promised last year and now are just paying for the cotton picked on their promise, one dollar in four—the rest in orders on their stores, where they sell molasses at fifteen cents a pint and soap and salt in proportion. The negroes take it hard that they must work at cotton again this year, especially as it must be to the neglect of their corn, upon which they have the sense to feel that their next winter's food depends. . . .

April 27, 1862.

The blessed soldiers, with all their wrongdoing, did this one good thing—they assured the negroes that they were free and must never again let their masters claim them, nor any masters. I think it is very touching to hear them begging Mr. Pierce to let them cultivate corn instead of cotton, of which they do not see the use, since they worked it last year for pay which has not come yet, while their corn has saved them from starvation. Next week they are to be paid a dollar an acre for the cotton they have planted under Mr. Pierce. They do not understand being paid on account, and they think one dollar an acre for ploughing, listing, or furrowing and planting is very little, which of course it is. Mr. P. wants to make it their interest to tend the cotton after it is planted, and so he pays on it just as little as he can, until it is all ready for the market. Meanwhile, if the masters drive us off, no return will ever be made for their work, to the people who are planting for us. Nothing is paid for the cultivation of the corn, and yet it will be Government property. The negroes are so willing to work on that, that Mr. P. has made it a rule that till a certain quantity of cotton is planted they shall not hoe the corn. This they take as a great hardship, for the corn wants hoeing. . . .

April 28, 1862

Mr. Pierce takes us to the different plantations as often as he can to talk to the negroes and make them contented, which they are not now by any means. . . .

The negroes are pretty cunning. They pretend they want us to stay, that they would be in despair if we went away, and they tell us they will give us eggs and chickens. Indeed, they do constantly offer eggs and they feel hurt if they are refused, for that is equivalent to

refusing to make any returns. Old Susannah, the cook, often sends to the table fish or other delicacies. When I ask her where she got them, she says a friend gave them to her and she gives them to us. She doesn't want pay—no, indeed. She always gave such things to her old "massas," and then they in return gave a little sweetening or something good from the house. It was give and take, good feeling all around. All giving on one side, I should think; all taking, nearly, on the other; and good feeling according to the nature of the class, one only content in grasping, the other in giving. They transfer their gratitude to "Government." One woman said to me, " I was servant-born, ma'am, and now 'cause de Gov'ment fightin' for me, I'll work for Gov'ment, dat I will, and welcome." Another woman, to-day, just from "the main," said to me that she had hard work to escape, . sleeping in "de ma'sh" and hiding all day. She brought away her two little children, and said her master had just "licked" her eldest son almost to death because he was suspected of wanting to join the Yankees. "They does it to spite us, ma'am, 'cause you come here. Dey spites us now 'cause de Yankees come." She was grate- ful to the Yankees for coming, nevertheless, but deplored that the season for planting cotton was over, because only the cotton-workers were to be paid and she was suffering for clothes. Another man said, "I craves work, ma'am, if I gets a little pay, but if we don't gets pay, we don't care — don't care to work." Natural enough.