

Life on the Sea Islands, 1864

Charlotte Forten

Introduction

The Civil War began just off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina in April, 1861. By November, the United States Army controlled the South Carolina coast including the Sea Islands, a collection of barrier islands stretching 185 miles. The Gule Indians lived on the Islands for hundreds of years before the Spanish colonized the southeastern coast of North America during the sixteenth century. Mainland South Carolina became a British colony in 1663, and unlike neighboring Virginia, was founded as a slave society. South Carolina had the largest population of enslaved people as a colony and later, a state. In fact, South Carolina still had the largest population of enslaved people when the Civil War broke out in 1861.

The Spanish ceded the Sea Islands to the British following the end of the French and Indian War in 1763. The low-tides and fertile soil of the Sea Islands made them ideal for cultivating rice and sugar, and later, cotton. The rice plantations in the Sea Islands were some of the largest and most lucrative in South. Rice planters were the wealthiest men in America, primarily because enslaved bodies were the most valuable property before the Civil War. Rice plantations relied on hundreds of enslaved people. Several Sea Island plantations had over one thousand enslaved people. Enslaved people on the Sea Islands essentially lived in small towns, where they developed their own distinct identity, culture, and language known as Gullah. The Gullah language was rooted in the Creek language of the Gule Indians, but included elements of Spanish, French, English, African, and Afro-Caribbean languages. The Gullah people had their own religious practices, communication system, family and community structure, and rituals (marriage, holiday celebrations, funerary practices).

With the U.S. Army on the march in early 1861, white planters abandoned their massive cotton and rice plantations, leaving behind over ten thousand enslaved people, who immediately divided the land into individual plots and carried on farming. When the military arrived under the command of General Thomas W. Sherman, they found a fully functioning free community on the cusp of a successful harvest of rice as well as cotton¹. During the first year of U.S. Army occupation (1861-62), the Gullah community harvested 90,000 pounds of cotton. For the time in their lives, the formerly enslaved were paid for their labor - one dollar for every four hundred pounds harvested. All other profits went to the U.S. Treasury.

Many political and military leaders saw an opportunity to replace the slave labor system with free labor while also turning a profit for the U.S. war effort. The Port

¹ General Thomas W. Sherman was brother to General William Tecumseh Sherman, who implemented a similar experiment on the Georgia Sea Islands, the end point of his famous "March to the Sea."

Royal “Experiment,” as it was called, offered the freed slaves individual plots of land with the promise of land ownership after working the land for several years. As we know, private property ownership and control of your own labor is the basis of “free labor.” General Sherman supervised the experiment, and invited northern teachers and missionaries to help the communities build a free society (a free society only works if there is an educated populous).

African American schoolteacher Charlotte Forten joined the Port Royal Experiment in 1862 and taught on St. Helena Island for two years. Forten was the granddaughter of James Forten, who owned a successful sail-making company in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Fortens were a wealthy, prominent, highly educated family, deeply involved with the abolitionist movement during the early nineteenth century. Charlotte Forten was more educated than most white northerners, and knew all of the prominent abolitionists, women’s rights activists, and other reformers before she moved to St. Helena Island.

Like most of the northerners who joined the Port Royal Experiment, it was a chance for Forten to put her convictions into action. When she arrived, she found that many of her students spoke only Gullah and were unfamiliar with the routines of school. The war raged all around them, and even though the Sea Islands were occupied by the U.S. Army, the danger of a Confederate attack was always near.

After Abraham Lincoln died in 1865, President Andrew Johnson put an end to the Port Royal Experiment (and similar projects throughout the South). Instead of allowing freedpeople to keep their individual plots of land, Johnson returned the land to the white planters who abandoned their plantations in 1861. In place of individual land ownership - the best change for freedpeople to become economically independent - Johnson required the them to sign sharecropper contracts with the same men who previously enslaved them, guaranteeing the freedpeople fell into a cycle of dependency and debt.

Forten kept a detailed journal of her experiences in Sea Islands, and published an abridged version in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1864 (a year before the war ended). Below is an excerpt from her article².

Primary Source

To THE EDITOR OF THE "ATLANTIC MONTHLY." -- The following graceful and picturesque description of the new condition of things on the Sea Islands of South Carolina, originally written for private perusal, seems to me worthy of a place in the "Atlantic." Its young author--

² Charlotte Forten, [Life on the Sea Islands \(Part I\)](#), *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1864. This source is believed to be in the public domain.

herself akin to the long-suffering race whose Exodus she so pleasantly describes -- is still engaged in her labor of love on St. Helena Island, - John Greenleaf Whittier³.

PART I.

It was on the afternoon of a warm, murky day late in October that our steamer, the United States, touched the landing at Hilton Head⁴. A motley assemblage had collected on the wharf, -- officers, soldiers, and "contrabands" of every size and hue: black was, however, the prevailing color⁵. The first view of Hilton Head is desolate enough, -- a long, low, sandy point, stretching out into the sea, with no visible dwellings upon it, except the rows of small white-roofed houses which have lately been built for the freed people.

After signing a paper wherein we declared ourselves loyal to the Government, and wherein, also, were set forth fearful penalties, should we ever be found guilty of treason, we were allowed to land, and immediately took General Saxton's boat, the Flora, for Beaufort. The General was on board, and we were presented to him. He is handsome, courteous, and affable, and looks -- as he is -- the gentleman and the soldier⁶.

From Hilton Head to Beaufort the same long, low line of sandy coast, bordered by trees; formidable gunboats in the distance, and the gray ruins of an old fort, said to have been built by the Huguenots more than two hundred years ago⁷. Arrived at Beaufort, we found that we had not yet reached our journey's end... We saw no one in the streets but soldiers and freed people. There were indications that already Northern improvements had reached this Southern town. Among them was a wharf, a convenience that one wonders how the Southerners could so long have existed without⁸. The more we know of their mode of life, the more are we inclined to marvel at its utter shiftlessness.

³ You might remember John Greenleaf Whittier from Harriet Robinson's account of life in the Lowell Mills, *Loom and Spindle*, which we read a few weeks ago. Whittier was well-known poet and member of the Transcendental movement along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Edgar Allen Poe. Whittier's most interesting poem, [*The Witches Daughter*](#) (1857), told the story of Susannah Martin, who was killed during the Salem Witch Trials (Whittier was a descendant of Martin). We read Susannah Martin's testimony from the Witch Trials week four of the semester. Whittier was a close family friend of the Fortens, and encouraged Charlotte to publish her journals.

⁴ Hilton Head served as the headquarters, so to speak, of the Port Royal Experiment.

⁵ "Contraband" refers to the enslaved people now living in U.S. occupied territory. They were not free, but neither were they still enslaved. They were, however, still considered valuable property. The U.S. Army was not empowered to "free" the enslaved, but the Army could include slaves among captured enemy property, i.e., contraband.

⁶ General Rufus Saxton served as Quartermaster of the Port Royal Experiment, meaning he was in charge of supplies. Saxton later married Mathilda Thompson, one of the missionaries at Port Royal.

⁷ The Huguenots were French Protestants, mostly Calvinists, during the century following the Protestant Reformation (1530s). The French government and monarchy were Catholic, and took severe measures against Protestant dissenters. As a result, Huguenots fled France and established settlements throughout Europe and the American colonies. Beaufort is a French word, after all.

⁸ A wharf is a place where ships dock. Ports may or may not have a wharf.

Little colored children of every hue were playing about the streets, looking as merry and happy as children ought to look, -- now that the evil shadow of Slavery no longer hangs over them. Some of the officers we met did not impress us favorably. They talked flippantly, and sneeringly of the negroes, whom they found we had come down to teach, using an epithet more offensive than gentlemanly. They assured us that there was great danger of Rebel attacks, that the yellow fever prevailed to an alarming extent, and that, indeed, the manufacture of coffins was the only business that was at all flourishing at present⁹. Although by no means daunted by these alarming stories, we were glad when the announcement of our boat relieved us from their edifying conversation. We rowed across to Ladies Island, which adjoins St. Helena, through the splendors of a grand Southern sunset. The gorgeous clouds of crimson and gold were reflected as in a mirror in the smooth, clear waters below. As we glided along, the rich tones of the negro boatmen broke upon the evening stillness, -- sweet, strange, and solemn -- "Jesus make de blind to see, Jesus make de cripple walk, Jesus make de deaf to hear. Walk in, kind Jesus! No man can bender me."¹⁰

It was nearly dark when we reached the island, and then we had a three-miles' drive through the lonely roads to the house of the superintendent. We thought how easy it would be for a band of guerrillas, had they chanced that way, to seize and hang us; but we were in that excited, jubilant state of mind which makes fear impossible, and sang "John Brown" with a will, as we drove through the pines and palmettos¹¹. Oh, it was good to sing that song in the very heart of Rebellom! Harry, our driver, amused us much. He was surprised to find that we had not heard of him before. "Why, I thought eberybody at de Nort had heard o' me he said, very innocently. We learned afterward that Mrs. F., who made the tour of the islands last summer, had publicly mentioned Harry. Some one had told him of it, and he of course imagined that he had become quite famous. Notwithstanding this little touch of vanity, Harry is one of the best and smartest men on the island...

The next morning L. and I were awakened by the cheerful voices of men and women, children and chickens, in the yard below. We ran to the window, and looked out. Women in bright-colored handkerchiefs, some carrying pails on their heads, were crossing the yard, busy with their morning work; children were playing, and tumbling around them. On every face there was a look of serenity and cheerfulness. My heart gave a great throb of happiness as I looked at them, and thought, "They are free! so long down-trodden, so long crushed to the earth, but now in their old homes, forever free!" And I thanked God that I had lived to see this day.

The school was opened in September. Many of the children had, however, received instruction during the summer. It was evident that they had made very rapid improvement, and we noticed

⁹ "The Rebels" refers to the Confederate Army.

¹⁰ The lyrics paraphrase a biblical passage.

¹¹ John Brown, a radical abolitionist, stormed the military arsenal at Harper's Ferry, (West) Virginia, in 1859. He hoped to spark a slave rebellion, which in turn would force the United States to end slavery in order to restore order. After he was captured and hanged, John Brown became a martyr for the abolitionist cause. Northerners celebrated his heroic sacrifice in the name of freedom with songs, poems, and essays. *John Brown's Body* was a marching song composed by U.S. Army soldiers during the Civil War. There are dozens of modified lyrics for the song, which remains one of the most popular American folk songs ever written.

with pleasure how bright and eager to learn many of them seemed. They sang in rich, sweet tones, and with a peculiar swaying motion of the body, which made their singing the more effective. They sang "Marching Along," with great spirit, and then one of their own hymns, the air of which is beautiful and touching -- "My sister, you want to git religion,

Go down in de Lonesome Valley; My brudder, you want to git religion,
Go down in de Lonesome Valley.

CHORUS.

"Go down in de Lonesome Valley,
Go down in de Lonesome Valley, my Lord,
Go down in de Lonesome Valley,
To meet my Jesus dere!

"Oh, feed on milk and honey,
Oh, feed on milk and honey, my Lord,
Oh, feed on milk and honey,
Meet my Jesus dere!

Oh, John he brought a letter,
Oh, John he brought a letter, my Lord,
Oh, Mary and Marta read 'em
Meet my Jesus dere!

CHORUS.

"Go down in de Lonesome Valley," etc¹².

They repeat their hymns several times, and while singing keep perfect time with their hands and feet...

The first day at school was rather trying. Most of my children were very small, and consequently restless. Some were too young to learn the alphabet. These little ones were brought to school because the older children -- in whose care their parents leave them while at work -- could not come without them. We were therefore willing to have them come, although they seemed to have discovered the secret of perpetual motion, and tried one's patience sadly. But after some days of positive, though not severe treatment, order was brought out of chaos, and I found but little difficulty in managing and quieting the tiniest and most restless spirits.

I never before saw children so eager to learn, although I had had several years' experience in New-England schools. Coming to school is a constant delight and recreation to them. They come here as other children go to play. The older ones, during the summer, work in the fields from early morning until eleven or twelve o'clock, and then come into school, after their hard toil in the hot sun, as bright and as anxious to learn as ever.

¹² "Land of Milk and Honey" was a popular slave spiritual.

Of course there are some stupid ones, but these are the minority. The majority learn with wonderful rapidity. Many of the grown people are desirous of learning to read. It is wonderful how a people who have been so long crushed to the earth, so imbruted as these have been, -- and they are said to be among the most degraded negroes of the South, -- can have so great a desire for knowledge, and such a capability for attaining it. One cannot believe that the haughty Anglo-Saxon race, after centuries of such an experience as these people have had, would be very much superior to them. And one's indignation increases against those who, North as well as South, taunt the colored race with inferiority while they themselves use every means in their power to crush and degrade them, denying them every right and privilege, closing against them every avenue of elevation and improvement. Were they, under such circumstances, intellectual and refined, they would certainly be vastly superior to any other race that ever existed¹³.

After the lessons, we used to talk freely to the children, often giving them slight sketches of some of the great and good men. Before teaching them the "John Brown" song, which they learned to sing with great spirit, Miss T. told them the story of the brave old man who had died for them. I told them about Toussaint, thinking it well they should know what one of their own color had done for his race¹⁴. They listened attentively, and seemed to understand. We found it rather hard to keep their attention in school. It is not strange, as they have been so entirely unused to intellectual concentration. It is necessary to interest them every moment, in order to keep their thoughts from wandering. Teaching here is consequently far more fatiguing than at the North. In the church, we had of course but one room in which to hear all the children; and to make one's self heard, when there were often as many as a hundred and forty reciting at once, it was necessary to tax the lungs very severely.

My walk to school, of about a mile, was part of the way through a road lined with trees, -- on one side stately pines, on the other noble live-oaks, hung with moss and canopied with vines. The ground was carpeted with brown, fragrant pine-leaves; and as I passed through in the morning, the woods were enlivened by the delicious songs of mocking-birds, which abound here, making one realize the truthful felicity of the description in "Evangeline,"-- "The mocking-bird, wildest of singers, Shook from his little throat such floods of delirious music That the whole air and the woods and the waves seemed silent to listen."¹⁵ The hedges were all aglow with the brilliant

¹³ Remember that Forten is black, despite the fact that she speaks about the freed people as separate from herself.

¹⁴ You might remember Toussaint Louverture from our discussion of the Haitian Revolution, which started in the 1790s and ended with the Louisiana Purchase. Louverture, trained by the French military, led a slave uprising against the French planters. The rebellion turned into a civil war between enslaved Haitians and French troops under the command of Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon conceded victory in 1804, making the Haitian Revolution the only successful slave rebellion in the Atlantic World.

¹⁵ *Evangeline* was an epic poem written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1847 (Longfellow's best-known poem was *Paul Revere's Ride* – listen my children, and you shall hear/Of the midnight of Paul Revere...). *Evangeline* told the tale of an Acadian woman removed from her homeland during the American War for Independence. The Acadians lived in the French-Canadian province of Acadia, located on the Eastern Canadian Coast (Nova Scotia). The military expelled the Acadians from their land so New Englanders might have access to the land. It was a land grab, not military strategy. Many Acadians relocated to the bayous of Louisiana (part of New Spain in the 1770s) where they lived with fugitive slaves and Native Americans. These mixed communities developed their own unique shared identity called Cajun. In the poem, Evangeline, exiled to Louisiana without Gabriel. Evangeline spends her days searching the bayous, crying out for her lost love. The "murmur of her moans whispered through the trees," as Longfellow put it. True Southern Gothic.

scarlet berries of the cassena, and on some of the oaks we observed the mistletoe, laden with its pure white, pearl-like berries. Out of the woods the roads are generally bad, and we found it hard work plodding through the deep sand...

They are willing to make many sacrifices that their children may attend school. One old woman, who had a large family of children and grandchildren, came regularly to school in the winter, and took her seat among the little ones. She was at least sixty years old. Another woman--who had one of the best faces I ever saw--came daily, and brought her baby in her arms. It happened to be one of the best babies in the world, a perfect little "model of deportment," and allowed its mother to pursue her studies without interruption.

...While writing these pages I am once more nearing Port Royal. The Fortunate Isles of Freedom are before me. I shall again tread the flower-skirted wood-paths of St. Helena, and the sombre pines and bearded oaks shall whisper in the sea-wind their grave welcome. I shall dwell again among "mine own people." I shall gather my scholars about me, and see smiles of greeting break over their dusk faces¹⁶. My heart sings a song of thanksgiving, at the thought that even I am permitted to do something for a long-abused race, and aid in promoting a higher, holier, and happier life on the Sea Islands.

¹⁶ Forten's "scholars" were her students.