

SELECTION FROM HORACE JAMES'S ANNUAL REPORT

WITHIN A MONTH after assuming the Superintendency of the Blacks in North Carolina, I was ordered by Major General J. G. Foster, then commanding the Department, to establish a colony of negroes upon Roanoke island. The good or ill success of this experiment ought to be credited as well to the mind which originated the enterprize as to those who were entrusted with its execution. It was General Foster's purpose to settle colored people on the unoccupied lands, and give them agricultural implements and mechanical tools to begin with, and to train and educate them for a free and independent community. It was also a part of his plan to arm and drill them for self defence.

This was in May, 1863. . . .

I went North in June, 1863, under orders from Gen. Foster, "to procure materials and implements with which to furnish the projected colony with an outfit," and in a few weeks raised in New England and New York between eight and nine thousand dollars. It was most cheerfully given, and the donations were accompanied with many expressions of good-will towards the works and of hearty interest in the colored people. Especially did the Freedmen's Associations at Boston and New York render efficient aid. . . .

The work was now prosecuted with vigor, though with little outside aid for some time. With compass, chart, and chain, and a gang of choppers, the old groves of pine, gum, holly, and cypress were penetrated, crossed and re-crossed and the upper, or northern, end of the island was laid out in acre lots, and at once assigned to families. Nothing could exceed the enthusiasm of these simple people, when they found themselves in possession of a spot they could call their own.

To be absolute owners of the soil, to be allowed to build upon their own lands cabins, however humble, in which they should enjoy the sacred privileges of a *home*, was more than they had ever dared to pray for. It was affecting to hear the old men and women declare how fervently they blessed the Lord, that their eyes were permitted to see this unexpected sight. The woods now began to ring with blows from the woodman's axe, and to gleam at night with the fires which consumed the refuse vegetation, swept off in clearing the forests.

It was never intended to give these people *farms* at Roanoke, but only a homestead, and a garden spot for each family. There were sufficient reasons for this, in that the island is not large enough to divide into farms for any considerable number of people. The land is not rich enough for profitable farming, though it will produce vegetables, grapes, and other fruits in abundance and variety. And again, invalids, aged people, and soldiers' wives and children could not be expected to improve more than a single acre. This was the plan of the settlement. Broad, straight avenues were laid out, 1,200 feet apart, up and down the island, nearly parallel with its shores and parallel with one another, which were named "Roanoke Avenue," "Lincoln Avenue," "Burnside Avenue," &c. At right angles with these were streets, somewhat narrower than the

avenues, and 400 feet apart, numbered "First Street," "Second Street," &c., &c., in one direction from a certain point, and "A Street," "B Street," &c., in the other direction.

This arrangement divided the land into parallelograms or sections, containing each twelve one acre lots, square in form, every one having a street frontage. Along these the houses were disposed, being placed in lines and all at the same distance from the street. The lots were neatly enclosed, and speedily improved by the freedmen, soon making "the wilderness and the solitary place glad" at their coming. Wives and children with alacrity united with the men in performing the work of the carpenter, the mason, and the gardener. So zealous were they in this work, as to spend, in many cases, much of the night in prosecuting it, giving no sleep to their eyes until they could close them sweetly, under their own dear roof-tree.

A good supply of lumber being indispensable when one would build a town, I purchased at the North a valuable steam-engine and saw-mill, thus using the larger portion of the funds which had been secured in aid of the freedmen. But as the mill could not be made immediately available, logs and boards split by hand were used at first, and chimneys of the Southern style were constructed of sticks and clay. A few sawed boards for floor, door, and window, were sometimes obtained in a boat expedition across the Sound, to Nagg's Head, Oregon Inlet, or Croatan, and thus their mansions were completed. A proud day was it for Mingo, or Luck, or Cudjoe, when he could survey his home as a thing accomplished, and sit at night by its blazing firelight and see the dark shadows of his wife and children dance upon the cabin wall. And this, too, in a Slave State! his old master living, perhaps, at the south end of the island! . . .

Some kind of domestic manufacturing, supplied to them as a regular business, would not only train them to habits of industry, but raise them above the level of mere field hands. To substitute an occupation which requires skill, and taxes ingenuity, for one which is coarse and plodding, is to confer a lasting benefit. In this view spinning and weaving have been encouraged. Some of the better mechanics on the island have manufactured spinning wheels for sale, doing it without the use of a lathe, and making a very good article. Many of the women can card, spin, and weave. They might succeed in willow work, if the material could be easily procured. I have had a quantity of osier willow slips planted on Roanoke, hoping to introduce, by and by, this species of industrial labor. The Friends in Philadelphia, among their many benefactions to the negroes in this District, have sent out some complete sets of shoemakers' tools, the use of which is understood by several of the freedmen on the island. The same is true of coopers' tools, and to a much larger extent; for the turpentine business, the leading pecuniary interest of North Carolina, has made them familiar with the making and mending of barrels. It is common to find colored men acquainted with splitting and shaving shingles, and not a few are constantly engaged in this business, selling them at from \$3.00 to \$7.00 per thousand.

The negro always builds his own house. Set him down where trees grow, give him an axe, a saw, a hammer, and twenty pounds of nails, and in a month his house is done. Let some disturbance of the times drive him from his cabin, and when he has

found an eligible spot, he will erect another, and another. An old Roanoke negro told me he had built eight houses for himself on his master's plantation. His heartless lord would give him a building spot, and suffer him to live there until he had cleared the land around his dwelling, and then would drive him out, to repeat the process in a new location.

Like all people who live near navigable waters, the negroes at Roanoke are fond of boats, and know how to manage them. Some few of them are respectable boat builders. About one hundred of the most active men on the island are employed in Government works by the Quartermaster and Commissary of the Post. Some two hundred more have been kept at work a large portion of the year upon the fortifications of the island. More than one hundred were sent, in September last, to Bermuda Hundred, to labor upon "Dutch Gap Canal" and elsewhere.

These occupations, with the toil expended upon their own premises, have kept the men generally employed, and given to the colony an aspect of industry, . . .

Roanoke Island is favorably located for carrying on fisheries, especially of herring, mullet, blue-fish, and shad. These have heretofore furnished one of the principal means of subsistence to the inhabitants. Preparations were made to pursue this business for the advantage of the colony; but the shad season in 1864 was much less productive than usual, the nets being broken and destroyed by ice and storms in the early spring.

Mr. Holland Streeter was entrusted with the charge of this business, and has pursued it, with a small gang of fishermen, through the year. Up to Jan. 1st, 1865, the income of the fisheries, as reported by Mr. Streeter, was \$1,404.27. It is expected to be much larger during the approaching season, if the elements prove propitious.

The mill before alluded to was substantially erected, near the military Headquarters of the island, during the spring and early summer, and has now been for several months in successful operation. The engine is of seventy horse-power, carrying several circular saws, a turning lathe, and a grist mill. Its capacity to produce different styles of lumber, and to convert grain into the form so widely used by the negroes, and indeed by all the Southern people for food, makes it a positive addition to the wealth and resources of the island, and as valuable to the whites as to the blacks. The officers of the Government, the troops, the attachés of the army, the white natives, and the negroes, are sharing alike in the benefits of this Northern institution. Thus do enterprise, thrift, and productiveness enter the gates which have been opened by the demon of war. On the 7th day of February, 1862, the very spot where now stands this peaceful engineering of labor was enveloped in the smoke of contending fleets and armies, and shot and shell plowed madly through the soil. . . .

The question is sometimes asked, whether the Freedmen's colony on Roanoke Island has proved a success? The answer may be gleaned in part from the statements already made. if by success is meant *complete self-support*, the question must be answered in the negative. Its insular and isolated position far removed from any centre of population, the necessity of clearing the lots assigned, which were all wild land, the

smallness of the garrison, furnishing but little employment to the people as laundresses, cooks, and servants, the partial failure of the shad fisheries, and above all, the transfer into the army of most of the laboring men, have made it necessary to feed the larger portion of the colonists at the expense of the Government.

But this is done in obedience to military orders in the case of all wives and children of negro troops, and is to be considered a part of their compensation.

In every other aspect except that of "rations," the colony has met and exceeded expectations.

It has proved a safe and undisturbed retreat for the families of soldiers, who were nobly defending our flag at Petersburg, Charleston, and Wilmington.

It has instructed many hundreds of children and adults to read and spell, and to value knowledge as the means of elevating them and their race, and assuring to their the blessings of freedom forever.

It has made three or four thousand human beings useless as "chattels," by breathing into them new hopes and aspirations, and fitting them to go forth from this Patmos, where they have been inspired with the spirit of liberty, and teach the same divine apocalypse to their brethren, now in "Confederate" bonds. . . .

Within a period of about twelve months, the settlers have built five hundred and ninety-one (591) houses, which, with the improvements made upon their lots, are estimated to be worth \$75.00 a piece. One of them was recently sold for \$150.00. Adopting the lower figure, here is a money value of forty-four thousand three hundred and twenty-five dollars (\$44,325.00), a sum large enough to have purchased the whole island three years ago, with all the improvements of two hundred years, under the rule and culture of its white inhabitants.

It has multiplied the value of real estate thirty-seven times in a single year, at least in the estimation of the negroes who occupy it, and has led the native whites to ask almost fabulous prices for the lands which they still retain.

It has furnished important manufacturing facilities to the island and its vicinity, by introducing valuable steam-power, and opening stores for trade, which will survive the war, and become elements of prosperity and sources of wealth. . . .

Roanoke Island is the key of six charming estuaries, whose ready navigation by small vessels and light draft steamboats, must needs make them hereafter the seat of a profitable commerce, in cotton, corn, turpentine, rosin, tar, timber, fish, oysters, wood, reeds, cranberries, and grapes. The Roanoke fisheries alone would yield fortunes every year if pursued in a business-like manner. The scuppernong grape, which is a native of North Carolina, if planted in vineyards and cultivated scientifically, might be made to produce on Roanoke alone, an income of \$100,000 annually. It grows here

spontaneously, and without enrichment of the soil, and yields, perhaps, the most delicious white wine that ever tempted the palate. I have corresponded with parties at the North, who are ready to commence its culture here as soon as the way is open. . . .

Sir Walter Raleigh's El Dorado, where gay cavaliers hoped to discover mines of gold, but only found starvation and an early grave, may yet fulfil, under the magic touch of freedom, the expectations of its early settlers. Its evergreen woods, its picturesque dales, its wave-kissed shores may yet, under the skillful appliances of labor, and the stimulus of republican institutions, be the abode of a prosperous and virtuous people, of varying blood, but of one destiny, differing, it may be, in social position, but equal before the law, a happy commonwealth, in which Ephraim shall not envy Judah, and Judah shall no longer vex Ephraim.

[Horace James, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina, 1864. With an Appendix. Containing the History and Management of the Freedmen in this Department up to June 1st, 1865* (Boston: W. F. Brown & Co., 1865): 21-34.]