

Roanoke Island, Sept. 5, 1863

Having just finished a two days inspection of matters here, I am happy to report progress in regard to our operations. The colony is fairly on its feet.

There are from eleven to twelve hundred negroes now on the Island. They have come here from Plymouth, Elizabeth City, Newbern, and from the country around these and other points. For the present they are living in close quarters, too much huddled together in barracks, formerly occupied by soldiers. But a large tract of well-wooded land has been laid off in streets running at right angles, and upon these streets lots of nearly an acre (40,000 ft.) have been assigned to the various families desiring them. We have already staked out the outlines of an African village of grand proportions. It would gratify their friends at the north could they see the energy and zeal with which the freedmen enter upon the work of clearing up their little acre of land, by cutting the timber upon it, and preparing it for their rude log-house. They are so animated by the prospect of a homestead of their own, and the little comforts of a freehold, that they labor, every spare moment by night as well as by day, and are as happy as larks in their toil. Let the unbeliever declare that the negro does not desire his freedom, and has no wish to secure the privilege of owning personal property, and real estate. The axes which I sent on a month ago and which are now ringing merrily in the green woods of Roanoke give the lie direct to all their reasonings, and falsify all their assertions. So do the singing voices of these happy men and women, who now really believe that they have powerful friends, and ask nothing more than a decent chance to make themselves wholly independent of government aid, and be thrifty, wealthy citizens.

Well were it if our steam engine were even now ready to saw out the boards for their dwellings. But it cannot be got to work for months yet, and meanwhile these people must be contented with ruder structures for the present winter. They are contented, and more than this, and are developing an energy and vitality which is highly encouraging. We can already see the smiling cottages of virtuous and industrious people clustering along the straight streets which the woodman's axe has opened through these before unbroken forests, and which will be the future glory of this noted island. I am surprised to find it so healthy here. Of the troops garrisoning the three forts only sixteen are ill enough to be off duty, and only one is dangerously sick. The breezes are strong and pure from the sea, and our teachers can begin here as soon as they can get transportation hither. On the whole the island smiles, the prospects are bright, the work advances.

We are beginning in the very wilderness, to lay the foundations of new empire, but the results when carried out to their proper results no mortal mind can foresee. We sow in faith, and expect to reap in joy.

I shall next address you from Newbern, between which place and this my communications will be frequent for a while. Yours truly, H.J.

[“Letter From Chaplain James,” *The Congregationalist* 15 (18 September 1863): 149.]