

LETTER
OF
THE SECRETARY OF WAR,
COMMUNICATING,

In compliance with a resolution of the Senate of December 17, 1866, reports of the assistant commissioners of freedmen, and a synopsis of laws respecting persons of color in the late slave States.

JANUARY 3, 1867.—Read and referred to the Committee on Military Affairs and the Militia.
JANUARY 21, 1867.—Ordered to be printed.

WAR DEPARTMENT,
Washington, January 3, 1867.

SIR: In compliance with the Senate's resolution of December 17, 1866, asking for reports of assistant commissioners of freedmen, and a synopsis of laws respecting persons of color in the late slave States, I have the honor to transmit herewith a report of 21st December, 1866, by the Commissioner of Freedmen, containing the information desired.

Very respectfully, sir, your obedient servant,

EDWIN M. STANTON,

Secretary of War.

Hon. L. F. S. FOSTER,
President of the Senate.

ORGANIZATION OF THE LABOR ON THE SEA ISLANDS.

On the first of January last orders reached this office directing that the sea islands of the State, which, up to that time, had been under the control of Brevet Major General Saxton, should be placed in my charge. As General Saxton, in his report to the honorable Secretary of War, represents this to have occurred in the preceding September, I append copies of your letter and order, marked A and B. On the 3d of February I proceeded to the islands, and on investigation found them in a very unsatisfactory condition. With the exception of the Rev. W. F. Eaton, agent of the bureau at St. Simon's island, and whom I have found to be thoroughly honest and competent, there were no white men on the outer and more important islands. The freedmen were armed, and would not allow any white person to land. They were mostly fed on government rations, and, with very few exceptions, were spending their time in fishing, hunting, and destroying the cattle, large numbers of which had been left on the

islands by the former owners. It was found that, while the government was sending them rations, they were slaughtering the deer which abound upon the islands, and selling the venison at high prices in Savannah.

Ossabaw, St. Catharine's, and Sapelo islands were under the control of Tunis G. Campbell, a colored man from New York city, appointed agent of the bureau by General Saxton. This man Campbell, who was afterwards dismissed, is a person of great plausibility and remarkable cunning. He was found to be cutting wood, selling it to passing steamers, appropriating the funds, and otherwise managing the island where he resided, for the benefit of himself and a few leaders among the freedmen. Some of the freedmen he employed, and whose produce he sold, have never yet received payment. Influenced by Campbell, the freedmen were unwilling to permit the white owners to return to the islands, even to occupy such portions of their property as had not been assigned to freedmen in compliance with General Sherman's Special Field Order No. 15, series of 1865. They insisted that the government should continue to furnish them with rations in whole or in part, representing that they had all the animals, implements, seeds, and nearly all the food, required to enable them to make a crop this year. But as on the sea islands and rice fields of the State they had failed the year previous, even when they were fed and assisted by the government, to raise sufficient food for their own support, and as there was a great demand for labor at high prices on the coast, I declined to accede to their request, but issued the following order :

[Special Field Orders No. 3.]

BUREAU REFUGEES, FREEDMEN, AND ABANDONED LANDS,
OFFICE ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER STATE OF GEORGIA,
Savannah, Ga., February 14, 1866.

1. Mr. W. F. Eaton is hereby appointed supervising agent of this bureau for St. Simon's island and of the sea islands south thereof, on the coast, and belonging to the State of Georgia.

2. The former owners of land upon St. Simon's and the sea islands south thereof, on the coast, and belonging to the State of Georgia, will be permitted to return and occupy their lands, or a portion thereof, subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter specified.

First. No owner will be allowed to make use of any threats against the freed people or the authorities of the United States, or to use any violence, or to say or do anything to disturb the peace on said islands. But all disputes will be referred to Mr. W. F. Eaton, the agent of the bureau for said islands, for adjudication.

Second. Grants of land made the freed people in compliance with General Sherman's Special Field Order No. 15, dated January 16, 1865, will be regarded as good and valid. But Mr. Eaton, the agent of the bureau, may set apart and consolidate them contiguous to each other on one portion of the plantation upon which such grants have been given, in such manner as to give the freed people a part possessing average fertility and other advantages, and, at the same time, place no unnecessary obstacle in the way of the owner's occupying and cultivating the remaining portion of the plantation.

Third. The former owners of land on said island will be allowed to occupy and cultivate the same when not assigned to freed people, as described in preceding section, or other portions of their estates that may be made vacant by the consolidation hereinbefore mentioned. Such owners will be permitted to hire freed people on terms satisfactory to both parties and approved by the bureau.

Fourth. The freed people now on the island, not having grants of land, will not be forced to leave their present domicile until the owners of the land upon

which they may be located, or their representatives, shall have offered them opportunity of labor upon such terms and conditions as shall be satisfactory to the bureau. Should such freed people refuse to accept this offer thus made them, then they shall remove from such plantations and allow the owners thereof the opportunity to hire others to cultivate the same.

DAVIS TILLSON,

Brigadier General Volunteers, Assistant Commissioner.

A little later this order was made to apply to all the sea islands of the State.

Procuring a small steamer, from time to time I took the former owners to the different islands, gathered the freedmen together, and explained, in presence of both parties, the object and wishes of the bureau. I was gratified to find a more reasonable disposition on the part of both than I had dared to anticipate; and whereas, in many cases, each had threatened to shoot the other on sight, when brought together much of their ill feeling disappeared, and very soon they were able to make arrangements for the owners to return, and the freedmen to labor for them on mutually satisfactory terms. In some instances the poverty of the owner prevented his planting this year; and, upon my recommendation, several northern gentlemen of capital purchased or rented their plantations and employed the freedmen.

By some ten weeks' personal effort I finally succeeded in settling their questions along the entire coast, in an amicable manner, without once resorting to force. On St. Catharine's island one hundred and forty-seven (147) freedmen, in spite of the advice and influence of the agent, Campbell, went to work for Messrs. Schuyler, of New York, and Winchester, of Boston, on very liberal terms. The balance of the freedmen on the island, some four hundred and twenty, (420,) have planted the southern and most fertile portion of the cleared land on the island. Notwithstanding the difference in the number of laborers, Messrs. Schuyler and Winchester's crop will be, at least, three times as large as that raised by the freedmen at the south end of the island.

In this, as in all other similar experiments in the State which have come to my knowledge, it has been clearly demonstrated that the freedmen, if left to work for themselves, and control their own labor, will not obtain any considerable success. This is the opinion to which the Rev. Mr. Eaton, who has been the agent of this bureau for St. Simon's and adjacent islands, from the time the freedmen were first sent there, has been reluctantly forced. No man has had a better or wider opportunity for observation, and no man of my acquaintance is better able to form a just and unbiased opinion. At no time during the existence of the race have the freedmen, as a mass, been called upon to exercise care, economy, and forecast. It cannot be expected they should, without cultivation, suddenly become possessed of these qualities.