

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Eaton's Experiment Chaplain Worked to Improve Plight of Freedmen

Leah W. Jewett

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Feature Essay

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Jewett, Leah Wood *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Eaton's Experiment Chaplain worked to improve plight of freedmen.*

Collection: John Eaton Letter, Mss. 4106, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

Educator, graduate of the Andover seminary, and antislavery advocate John Eaton, Jr., of New Hampshire joined the 27th Ohio Regiment of Volunteers as chaplain in 1861. Eaton's work to improve the plight of former slaves, especially in light of opposition from those supporting the Union cause whose first priority were loyal white citizens, is remarkable. A one-page letter written by Eaton to General William T. Sherman on January 30, 1864, recently cataloged as part of the Louisiana Lower Mississippi Valley Collections housed in LSU Libraries' Special Collections, illuminates the complicated history of the experimental plantation leasing system, as well as one man's individual efforts to secure a successful future for the recently enslaved.

In 1863 Eaton was appointed to serve as the Colonel of the 9th Regiment Louisiana Volunteers of African Descent (Eaton 107-108).

It was General Grant's intention to have me make the organization under me a sort of Home Guard, - a colored military force, within the regular army, which should perform the duties required of troops in protecting the plantations, the wood-cutting operations, and the various enterprises undertaken beneath our superintendence (Eaton 107).

...In view of the proposed character of the regiment, we accepted as soldiers men who, though they were of a lower grade of physique than that which is acceptable in the regular army, were competent to fulfil [*sic*] all the duties of the camp wherever they might be stationed, and to resist attacks from the bands of guerillas that infested the country and threatened the plantations. The regiment [9th Regiment Louisiana Volunteers of African Descent] was filled very rapidly, and an order for a second regiment of like character was issued [which would be

named the 7th Regiment Louisiana Volunteers of African Descent] (Eaton 108-109).

The regiments were soon renamed the 63rd and 64th United States Colored infantry (Eaton 109).

At the time of Eaton's writing, Grant had risen to command of the Military Division of the Mississippi, and William T. Sherman was in command of the Department of Tennessee, under which Eaton operated.

The text of the letter follows:

Office General Superintendent û Freedmen

Vicksburg, Miss.

January 30, 1864

Maj. Gen'l W. T. Sherman

Commanding Dept. Tenn.

Gen'l,

The enclosed orders will inform you of the organization of the 9th and 7th Louisiana Regiments A. D. their character and object. Present changes render the question of their location difficult to answer.

I am informed by Hon. Mr. Mellen Supervising Spec. Agent Treasury Department as well as by Hon. Mr. J. E. Yeatman associated with him in the leasing of plantations and care of the labor of freedmen, that you propose to order Gen'l Ellet with his Marine Brigade, to patrol the Miss. specially within the limits in which plantations are leased perhaps the mouth of the Arkansas River and Vicksburg.

The points around which center land cultivated by the freed people are Cannons Plantation near Natchez, protected by three companies of these regiments. Jeff Davis' Bend, protected by your companies û both considered secure û next month (or North?) Millikens Bend, Goodrich Landing on the West-bank of the river. Skipwith's Landing, a naval station, and Greenville on

the East-bank. and plantations near Helena, Ark.

The object is to withdraw the thousands of people congregated in and around cities and camps, idle, sickening and dying; to the plantations at and near the above points, as far as possible to work for private parties, otherwise, under Gov't supervision.

We have two companies now here for Millikens Bend, in removing the people from Island 10. and Memphis we have seven companies, which with your approbation, can be located; two at Goodrich's Landing, two at Skipwith's Landing. and three at Greenville. to guard stores and act as a rallying nucleus for the planters and all their laborers who may be armed as a sort of militia and called into action at the discretion of the officer in command. Soon no doubt each of these points will be rendered secure by the rise of the backwaters. If only small bands of robbers attack, the few companies at these points can doubtless protect themselves; if a larger force, will or will not, in your opinion, the Marine Brigade be sufficient by its concentration to repel any such larger attack, and render expedient the location of these companies severally as suggested above?

If this meets your approbation and receives your order, transports will be immediately needed in carrying out the plan to move the troops and the people and their supplies for which we shall be dependent on your order.

The panic incident to the removal of troops from the river bank, great exposure and suffering of the people and the advancing of the season in which to employ their labor, render immediate action imperative.

The great labor incident to your contemplated departure I have rendered me exceedingly reluctant to harass you with these matters. But you are our authority and the command must come from you.

I am General

Very respectfully yr obdt servt-

John Eaton

Col. and Genl Supt Freedmen

Dept Tenn and State of Ark

Eaton reflected later regarding the good work of the 63rd and 64th regiments:

The bravery of the colored troops who fought in the larger engagements, such as those at Port Hudson or Milliken's Bend, thrilled the country at the time and in little danger of being forgotten by later generations, but the humbler duty of safeguarding the plantations from assaults which were often vindictive and particularly cruel, the task of protecting the women and children, the aged and inform, - these were services which devolved upon men debarred by physical incapacity from the more heroic campaigns endured by their brothers, but no whit less devoted to the Union, no whit less brave in their loyalty to the cause that had freed them, (Eaton 112).

To place Eaton's letter and overall contributions in context, it is important to consider both the historical nature of the antebellum settlement at Davis Bend, Mississippi, and the plantation leasing system in general.

Joseph Davis, eldest brother of Jefferson Davis, future President of the Confederacy, worked a plantation in a fertile curve of the Mississippi River from the late 1820s through the mid-1850s. Approximately 25 miles south of Vicksburg, the property was to be called Davis Bend and eventually included both Hurricane Plantation, owned by Joseph, and Brierfield, later owned by Jefferson (Hermann 9, 13).

As contradictory as this concept sounds to the modern researcher, it was Joseph's desire, reinforced upon a chance meeting with Utopian advocate Robert Owens, to create a model slave community based on cooperation, rather than coercion by force (Hermann 8). Unusual among his peers for his innovative approach to plantation management, Joseph took advantage of new technologies as they came available, purchasing one of the first steam-powered cotton gins in the area (Hermann 11). One of Mississippi's largest slaveholders (over 300 slaves labored on Hurricane Plantation in 1860), Joseph Davis established a court with slave jurors in order to encourage internal conflict resolution, though Davis served as the judge (Hermann 12). He supported slaves in their efforts to acquire skills and entrepreneurial endeavors (Hermann 14).

Benjamin Thornton Montgomery, considered Joseph's head slave, was an educated man in whom Joseph placed much responsibility and trust regarding the managing of Hurricane Plantation. Montgomery set up a store on the property, selling goods and services to both white and black consumers (Hermann 17-18). But although Montgomery earned the respect of many in the community, the fact remained that he was enslaved, as was his family. Purchasing their freedom and moving north was not an immediate option, as Montgomery no doubt keenly understood both his unique status at Hurricane and the protection provided to his family by Joseph (Hermann 22).

Joseph's experiment was derailed in 1862 when flooding and federal victories threatened the Davis compound. While he took some slaves and personal belongings with him as his family evacuated, many of the Davis slaves fled on their own, returning later to loot the property. Joseph's shock reflects his inability to fully comprehend the fact that only the slaveholder found the peculiar institution truly desirable and beneficial (Hermann 38). Because white overseers had also left the plantation, slave Benjamin Montgomery took over management of the plantation, providing for the slaves laboring there and ensuring that planting continued (Hermann 40-41).

When Joseph learned that some former slaves remained at work on the property, he sought assistance of Confederate troops to protect the former slaves from Union forces. As it turns out, Union troops had armed the people of Davis Bend in order to protect both property and livestock (Hermann 43).

Federal victories brought thousands of former slaves to the area, resulting in a humanitarian nightmare. In response General Ulysses S. Grant appointed Chaplain John Eaton, Jr. of the 27th Ohio to serve as Superintendent of Freedmen in 1862, calling for him to establish refugee camps in which former slaves would be fed and sheltered, and organized into groups for harvesting the cotton crop (Ross 215).

Eaton's embrace of a free-labor ideology combined several philosophical aspects, described by author Stephen Ross as a fusion of religion, morality and practical economics (Ross 215). Eaton sought to improve the plight of the freedmen. He believed charity in and of itself insufficient û his program was based on the idea of self-help, so that, in the long term, laborers could make a successful transition from slavery to freedom (Ross 216).

In February 1863 Confederate forces sunk the *Indianola*. As David Porter sought to recover the vessel, he made landing at Davis Bend. Impressed by the community at work, he enlisted Benjamin Montgomery's son, Isaiah, as his cabin boy, and worked to protect laborers in the area with naval patrols (Hermann 41-42). Montgomery eventually moved his family to Cincinnati to escape the chaos of war (Hermann 42).

Modeled after an existing contract labor system in Louisiana established under General Benjamin Butler and expanded by General Nathaniel P. Banks, in 1863 Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas established a plantation leasing program for the Mississippi River Valley, an extension of his duties as a recruiter of black troops (Foner 55-57).

Building on the existing efforts of the community of laborers at Davis Bend upon instructions from Grant after the fall of Vicksburg, Eaton enacted a two-fold approach regarding the plantation lessee program in which the federal government seized lands abandoned by Confederate sympathizers, and subdivided it among lessees for cultivation (Ross 218). Eaton worked to establish what were called Home Farms, temporary homes for invalids and the unemployed, where any profit from labor on these tracts was to be placed in a general Freedmen's Fund for the benefit of the group as a whole. In addition, the plan allowed lessees (individuals and/or private companies) to establish individual contracts with laborers for cultivation, subject to approval by Eaton's department (Ross 217).

The lure of fast fortune proved irresistible to many an unscrupulous northern speculator, threatening Eaton's plan to assist the freedmen (Ross 217). In response, Eaton worked to lease to independent black farmers before opening leasing opportunities to whites (Ross 217-219).

Aware of the potential for slaves to be taken advantage of by corrupt Union officers, Eaton sought a like-minded individual devoted to the cause of freedmen to assist him. Samuel Thomas, who had served as a captain in the 27th Ohio, fit the bill. Eaton appointed him in August 1863 to organize and protect freedmen in Vicksburg (Hermann 45-46). Eaton continued service as the General Superintendent of Freedmen for the Department of Tennessee, including Arkansas, while on active duty as the colonel of the 9th Louisiana A.D. (Eaton 111).

Rampant fraud and corruption regarding distribution of confiscated Confederate property led Congress to assign the management of plantation lessee program to the Treasury Department. William P. Mellen, Supervising Agent of the Treasury, along with James E. Yeatman, President of the independent Western Sanitary Commission, worked to protect freedmen from abuse and established regulations regarding the plantation leasing program (Hermann 48).

Lessees complained that the instituted changes to Thomas's original program, including an increase in wages, benefitted black laborers to the detriment of loyal white men (Bigelow 358). In addition lessees faced frequent raids from Confederates, and laborers were often recruited for service in the Union army (Wiley 445-446). Eventually President Abraham Lincoln returned the plantation leasing system to the control of the military (Gerteis 60). This political tug of war surely harmed laborers the most.

The final blow to the system came near the end of the war, in the form of amnesty toward former plantation owners who signed the loyalty oath; property promised to freedmen was revoked and returned to former owners (Hermann 50). Continuing the trend in the post-war period, President Andrew Johnson pardoned many a native planter, including Joseph Davis. Concerned about federal revocation of the return, Davis sold the property as a whole to Benjamin Montgomery², still living in Cincinnati at the time (Ross 227). While the leasing/free labor system did not continue as Eaton had envisioned, it did prove that freemen could work for their own benefit and be productive citizens, though this lesson was not integrated into either federal Reconstruction programs or attitudes toward freedmen) (Ross 228).

After the war, among other accomplishments, Eaton served as editor of the newspaper *Memphis Post*, participated in U.S. Grant's campaign for president, and became the first head of the U.S. Bureau of Education (Eaton xvii û xxxi).

1 - Eaton may be referring to Sherman's Meridian Campaign that would take place in February 1864, considered by author Kevin Daugherty as a practice run for the March to the Sea. (Dougherty 1).

2 û Both Montgomery and his son, Isaiah, worked to maintain the free black agrarian community after the war. The name of the community was later

changed to Mound Bayou, and functioned with various degrees of success until Isaiah's death in the 1920s.

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About the illustration:

John Eaton, Jr.

from Eaton's *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen: Reminiscences of the Civil War* Longmans, Green and Co., 1907: New York.

Leah Wood Jewett is the Exhibitions Coordinator and Civil War Manuscript Archivist at Hill Memorial Library, LSU Libraries' Special Collections.