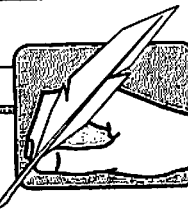


PRIMARY SOURCE ACTIVITY



A Bleak Future for Freedmen

CHAPTER
13

In a letter to the editor published in the November 29, 1865, issue of *Weekly Anglo-African*, Samuel Childress, a former slave in Nashville, expressed his opinions about presidential Reconstruction.

As you read, think about the problems confronting formerly enslaved people.

Mr. Editor:

You desire to know our opinions respecting the policy of the President concerning the colored race. We are not acquainted with the whole of it—we do not feel confident to advise the President, nevertheless we cannot avoid having impressions of some sort respecting some things which have been done, and some things which have been left undone. To us the prospect seems gloomy. We have no permanent homes, and we see no prospect of getting any.

Most of us are accustomed to farm labor, and whatever skill we possess is chiefly in that direction. Land is dear, and few of us are able to buy it. We can hire out to our former masters, it may be said. It is true that we can do so to a considerate extent; but it is well known that the temper of our former masters has not greatly improved toward us.

Is it the intention of the Government to drive us to our worst enemies to ask for work, and that too upon the very soil which has been forfeited by the treason of the pretended owner? Our race has tilled this land for ages; whatever wealth has been accumulated South has been acquired mainly by our labor. The profits of it have gone to increase the pride and wickedness of our old masters, while we have been left in ignorance and degradation; all this oppression and wrong were committed

under the United States Government, which stood ready with loaded guns and fixed bayonets to strike us down if we resisted our masters.

The small oppressor was the State; the great oppressor was the United States. When the nation conquered the rebels, the property of the latter was forfeited to the Government. . . .

It cannot be denied that the colored race earned nearly all this property. The United States, as High Sheriff of the Court of Heaven, held it in its hand, and could do with it what it pleased. Justice required that it should be paid over to the colored race who had been robbed of it. But what did it do with it? Let the Proclamations and pardons of the Government answer. It has gone back again to the very men whose hands are dripping with the blood of murdered prisoners, and whose cruelties cry to heaven for vengeance.

It would seem that it was regarded as a greater crime to be black than to be a rebel. If this is the ethics which is to prevail, then we have more judgments in store for the nation.

We think the Government ought in justice to the race to provide for their obtaining farms at such prices, and on such terms as would enable our people in a reasonable time to have a home of their own, on which they might hope to earn a living, and educate their children.

From WITNESS FOR FREEDOM, edited by C. Peter Ripley.
Copyright © 1993. Published by the University of North Carolina Press.

Questions to Think About

1. Why did Childress think freedmen faced a gloomy future?
2. Why did he view both the state and federal governments as oppressors of the freedmen?
3. **Identifying Alternatives** What alternatives did he suggest to the presidential Reconstruction plan?