A Journey among the Contrabands:
The Diary of Walter Totten Carpenter

Edited by Frank R. Levstik

During the Civil War years the Indiana Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends directed much of its philanthropic work toward the education and rehabilitation of the freed Negroes in the South. Such activity on the part of Indiana Quakers followed an historic tradition dating back to the first meeting of the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends in 1821. From that time on through the Civil War the meeting maintained a Committee on the Concerns of the People of Color, the primary function of which dealt with the promotion of education for Negroes. Through the committee's efforts, between thirty and forty day schools were in operation in Indiana just prior to the Civil War for the instruction of blacks. Quakers also aided fugitive slaves by furnishing legal counsel or assisting them in their movement northward. During the war years the Indiana Yearly Meeting cooperated with the Ohio, Iowa, and Western meetings in aiding the freedmen.

Following President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Indiana Quakers began to send agents and volunteers south to aid the freedmen. The minutes of the yearly meeting in 1864 noted: "About the beginning of the present year, we learned that large numbers of freedmen, mostly women and children, had arrived within the Union.

*Frank R. Levstik is state archivist of Ohio, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.

lines in the State of Tennessee, in a very destitute condition. . . . This was liberally responded to, and a large amount of clothing was procured and forwarded.\textsuperscript{2} By 1864 the Indiana Yearly Meeting had sent approximately twenty-one volunteers to set up schools and asylums, teach, and distribute goods to Negroes in those southern states occupied by federal armies. During 1864 the Indiana Friends spent $23,153.37 to provide medicine, books, farm implements, and dry goods for the freedmen.\textsuperscript{3} In 1865 a number of activities which had been initiated by the Quakers were taken over by the Freedman's Bureau, a federal agency. Nevertheless, the Indiana Yearly Meeting still provided $14,631.14 for the relief of the Negro in 1865.\textsuperscript{4}

Federal policy toward the contrabands—\textit{i.e.}, blacks escaping to or brought within Union lines during the war\textsuperscript{5}—was confused at best. Some Union officers were of pro-slavery sentiment while others were rabid abolitionists. For example, General Henry W. Halleck prohibited slaves from entering his lines; General David Hunter, even before Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, issued orders stating that persons held as slaves were forever free; and General John C. Frémont likewise ordered confiscation of property and freeing of slaves. Lincoln later remanded Hunter's and Frémont's orders, stating that such a move was premature. With the passage of the first Confiscation Act on August 6, 1861, the federal government had attempted to establish uniform treatment for fugitives who had fled to Union lines. The act provided that any property used by the owner's consent and with his knowledge in aiding or abetting insurrection against the United States was a lawful subject of prize and capture. Property consisting of slaves

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{2} Society of Friends, \textit{Minutes of Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends}, 1864, p. 20.
\item \textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 18-21, 25.
\item \textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 1865, p. 47, 53.
\item \textsuperscript{5} The term “contraband” as applied to property was the designation given to slaves escaping to or brought within Union lines during the Civil War. The origin of the term came from Union General Benjamin F. Butler who applied it to the runaways escaping to his lines in early 1861. Butler neither freed nor returned the Negroes but had them work instead on his fortifications. Mark Mayo Boatner III, \textit{The Civil War Dictionary} (New York, 1959), 172. The term “refugees” came to include both white and black persons fleeing their homes and plantations in search of freedom and sustenance.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
was to be forever free. Throughout the war, however, military policy toward the contrabands remained inconsistent and their condition poor.

Following their annual meeting in 1863 the Indiana Quakers sent Walter Totten Carpenter to Tennessee and Alabama to aid the contrabands. Born in Duanesburg, New York, on January 1, 1811, Carpenter, a birthright member of the Society of Friends, immigrated to Clinton County, Ohio, with his family in 1815. In 1834, after marrying Susan Mabie, he moved to Cincinnati and began to operate a general store and milk business. Seven years later Carpenter and his family returned to Clarksville, Ohio, where he entered into partnership in a mercantile firm with John Hadley. Returning to Cincinnati in 1844, Carpenter joined his brother, Calvin, in the general commission business. Carpenter's second stay in Cincinnati lasted four years. Alarmed by the possibility of contracting tuberculosis, he and his family returned to Clarksville. Finally, in 1857, the Carpenters left Clarksville and moved to Richmond, Indiana. During the next two decades Walter and Susan Carpenter served as superintendent and matron at Earlham College in Richmond. As matron, Mrs. Carpenter had charge of the domestic arrangements of the college while Mr. Carpenter had general responsibility for the entire functioning of the institution, both academic and operational. During most of the period from 1858 to 1872 they remained at Earlham. The longest break in this role came during 1866-1868 when the Carpenters resigned due to Mrs. Carpenter's poor health. The single other interruption came during 1863-1864 when Mr. Carpenter traveled to the southern states as agent of the Freedman's Committee of the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends. Around 1880 Carpenter was appointed to a trusteeship at Earlham College, a position which he held until 1893. He died on August 31, 1910, at the age of ninety-nine.

Carpenter kept an account of his trip to hospitals and contraband camps in middle Tennessee and northern Alabama in 1863-1864. It is evident from his diary that he was a literate and observant individual. His spelling is accurate, although punctuation is sometimes original. The diary, written

---

in pencil in the traditional pocket sized format, records Carpenter's expense account and family genealogy in addition to his observations on the freedmen. The contents of the diary for the period from January 1 to March 24, 1864, are of extraordinary interest. Of note are Carpenter's record of philanthropic activity among the freedmen and his discussion of their physical and moral condition. Furthermore, Carpenter makes the acquaintance of and comments on principal military leaders working with the Negro in Tennessee.

WALTER TOTTEN CARPENTER
AGED 87

Courtesy Lilly Library, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana.
1 month lst, 1864 [January 1, 1864]

My fifty-third birthday, never remember to have passed this anniversary under so much mental disruption.

Have been casting in my mind whether it is caused by not having performed my various duties during the past year as I should have done; or whether it is somewhat in sympathy with the very many who in the present condition of our country are universally exposed to this very severely cold atmosphere; or whether it is from the prospect of leaving my family and home in a few days for a temporary sojourn in the south or what is to me an untried field of labour.

1 month 4 [January 4]

Left home hardly knowing whither I am going and still less when I may return.

1 month 6

Detained at Cincinnati until this evening in making arrangements for goods to follow, and arrived at Louisville almost noon the 7th and left for Nashville on the morning of the 8th passing through Elizabethtown, Mumfordsville [sic], Cave City, Bowling Green, and Gallatin to Nashville, 185 miles, reaching there about nine o'clock.

1 month 9

Visited the Cumberland Hospital which has some twelve hundred patients and thirty physicians besides nurses, cooks, wash-women &c, and all living in tents, which being floored and furnished with stoves are comfortable even now with the mercury at zero. This hospital is under the care of Lt. Mc-
Dermit of Dayton, Ohio, who is a friend of the contraband, gives employment to many and speaks highly of their services. Also visited the contraband hospital where there are now four hundred and twenty colored patients. Was conducted through the wards by Lt. Runayne who spoke kindly to them as we passed along. It was gratifying to see them so well cared for.

1 month 10, First day [Sunday]

While my family and friends at home were as I hope, attending to the duty and enjoying the privilege of worship I did not see how I could be better employed than in visiting some of the freedmen at their various stopping places. Found some in tents some in basements some in garrets and some in open out buildings. Many of them thinly clad and with all the clothing they possess on their backs. Yet none of them complained of extreme suffering. All that are able to work can get employment and I did not meet with a family but what had one or more of that class.

1 month 11

Took the cars at four o'clock for Murfreesboro [sic] and got there about 9, a distance of thirty miles.

First looked through one of the hospitals for sick and wounded soldiers containing about two hundred but few of whom are confined to their beds. Next went to the contraband hospital under care of Lt. Charles N. Hood containing about eighty some of them very ill.

Then to the contraband camp near by where near two thousand occupy shanties left by soldiers. They are many of them from this section of the country are well clad and mostly well supplied with bedding. They all have rations dealt out to them and the men have employment but the women say they can get nothing to do. About one fourth are men about one third women and the balance children. Also went out to the great battle ground on a six thousand acre cotton farm which is now mostly out to the commons.2 Since the battle, extensive fortifications have been erected which are now nearly completed, with ample bomb proof magazines.

Two regiments of soldiers have their winter quarters within the fortifications in snug cedar log huts. Near by 2,000 colored troops.  

1 month 12  
Took the train for Stevenson and Bridgeport, Alabama. Had passenger cars to the first about 100 miles and then we were trundled into fruit [sic] and cattle cars ten miles to Bridgeport. Every thing now becomes strictly military rarely seeing one in citizen's clothing. The tide of travel down to the front as they call it wonderful and yet nearly all directly connected with the army. Drifting down with it there is such a constant flow of profanity one can hardly keep the language out of mind "broad is the way and wide is the gate" &c and occasionally the antichristian spirit becomes so dominant that he begins to cast about with some anxiety lest the ten righteous could not be found in the midst. At Stevenson are about 150 contrabands mostly women and children and at Bridgeport about 130 mostly men. At both places they are furnished tents and rations by government. The business at Bridgeport is immense, all the army stores having to be re-shipped besides supplying a number of regiments here in winter quarters. Some ten thousand persons are here living in tents. These are surroundings so different from what we at the north are accustomed that we can scarcely realize that we are in our own country. The railroad to Chattanooga not having been reconstructed I took the boat Kingston to go up the river a distance of 70 miles instead of 25 by land. This  

---

3 The Negro troops were probably members of the Twelfth, Thirteenth, and Fifteenth regiments, United States Colored Troops, organized in late 1863 in middle Tennessee. The three regiments are known to have guarded railroads in the area of the diarist's visit. See Frederick H. Dyer, A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion (3 vols., New York, 1959), III, 1726.  
4 Stevenson and Bridgeport, Alabama, were vital points on General William T. Sherman's rail and river communications line to Nashville and the North. At Bridgeport, thirty miles southwest of Chattanooga, the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad crossed the Tennessee River. Stevenson, ten miles west and heavily garrisoned, was at the junction of the Charleston and Memphis Railroad. See George Edgar Turner, Victory Rode the Rails: The Strategic Place of the Railroads in the Civil War (New York, 1953), 30-31, 121.  
5 Matthew 7:13.  
7 The railroad to Chattanooga had been destroyed during that Chattanooga campaign of October to November, 1863. Boatner, Civil War Dictionary, 143.
Contrabands coming into camp in consequence of the Proclamation
Reproduced from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, XV (November 22, 1862), 140.
is the first day that I have been reminded by the weather that I am in the “sunny south.”

1 month 14

Left Bridgeport yesterday about 4 o'clock and arrived at Chattanooga about about one today. The weather was fine and with good accommodation would be delightful trip, but the boat was small and not more than half of the passengers could lay down at once, and the floor was so dirty I did not try it.

1 month 15

Walked upon Lookout Mountain said to be twenty one hundred feet high and that it affords a view into seven states with the aid of a glass and four with the naked eye.* Find but few contrabands here having been sent back in consequence of the difficulty in transporting subsistence here for the army.

1 month 16

Called on General Whipple* one of General Thomas’ staff who says he has sent for a company of coloured troops in order to have quarters prepared for the contrabands. He sent an orderly with me to Major John H. Spooner† who is orthodox on the subject of freedmen and is anxious to have them set to work on confiscated farms where they can earn a living, and establish schools amongst them for the education of children and adults.

1 month 17

Having obtained the countersign, without which no one can pass a guard at night, I arose about four, and with bunk

* Lookout Mountain was the site of the “Battle above the Clouds,” November 24, 1863, during the Chattanooga campaign. The mountain was covered by a heavy fog on the day of the battle, thus the term given to the engagement. Ibid., 144-45.

† William Dennison Whipple served as chief of staff for Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas from July, 1863, to July, 1864. Whipple, a New York born general, served on the frontier and in Indian fighting prior to the Civil War. Immediately before joining Thomas, Whipple had served in the Peninsular Campaign and at First Bull Run. Ibid., 912.

and blanket in hand made my way to the landing about half mile distant. The sail to Bridgeport under favorable circumstances would be a pleasant one, but on board a boat that afforded neither fire or breakfast for passengers it was rather tedious, not getting to Bridgeport until one o'clock.

1 month 18

After a very poor meal which had to serve for breakfast, dinner and supper, we took a fruit train to Stevenson where we were to find a passenger train which proved to be a failure, and we continued with the fruit train to Nashville which we reached at five o'clock on the evening of the 18th.

1 month 19

Called on Captain Mussey\(^\text{11}\) who is engaged in recruiting coloured troops and seems to be interested for contrabands. He furnished me a horse to ride out in the country with J. B. White and see about a hundred of the wives and children of those who have enlisted, now under care of government, which they are finding homes for as they have opportunity. They have good house room and sufficient clothing and receive rations, but they are very filthy, and I found that three of the number had died last night, and that a case of small pox had just broken out, which will probably spread through the company. Called on David M. Wilson, agent for the Western Freedman's Aid Society,\(^\text{12}\) who is furnished a room by government and appears to be working in earnest for the relief of the destitute contrabands. Those who appear to be best informed on the subject estimate the colored population

---

\(^{11}\) Reuben Delavan Mussey, a captain in the Nineteenth United States Infantry, was sent to Nashville during 1863 to aid in the organization of Negro regiments. Historians often credit him with being one of the first regular army officers to ask permission to raise Negro troops. He is reputed to have been the first to suggest enlistment of Negro regiments as United States, rather than state, regiments. See Boatner, Civil War Dictionary, 576.

\(^{12}\) The Western Freedman's Aid Commission was organized in January, 1863, at Cincinnati, Ohio, with Levi Coffin as its general agent. Coffin had arrived in Newport, Indiana, in 1826, where he became an active participant in the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends. In the mid-1840s he moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he continued his activity on behalf of the Negro. The Society of Friends in Ohio and Indiana were among the earliest and most ardent supporters of the Western Freedman's Aid Commission. The commission proposed to supply the physical wants of the freedman plus aiding in their instruction, guidance, and elevation. See Report of the Western Freedman's Aid Commission to a Delegated Convention Held in Indianapolis, Indiana, July 19 and 20, 1864 (n.p., n.d.), 2.
here at this time, at ten thousand, over two thirds of whom are contrabands with daily accessions. Visited a large school building now filled with refugees. Many of the rooms very much crowded and dirty in the extreme. They appear to be quite as destitute and in every respect as degraded as the contrabands. Some of them have been driven from their homes but most of them have left to avoid starvation there being nothing left in their neighborhoods to subsist upon.

1 month 20

Visited the two coloured schools which have been put in operation by the Presbyterians. In one of them was about fifty and in the other about one hundred and thirty pupils shaded all the way from black to white, but all I suppose having a tincture of African blood.

They were well clad mostly clean, looked intelligent and were making respectable recitations. Went next to some of the poorest houses filled with contrabands. A single room with no glass windows but holes enough between the logs on weather boarding to light it, rents for five dollars a month. In such a room we often find four or five families quartered. When they come to lay down at night they cover the entire floor.

5 day [Thursday], 1 month 21

Started in the afternoon to Clarksville on board the Carrie a very nice little boat. Met on board with Ira H. Hutchins and William Brown of Indiana and Hannah Hughes of Ohio on their way to Clarksville to open a school for contrabands under the Western Freedman's Aid Commission.

Sixth day, 1 month 22

A delightful spring morning, and in a walk around Clarksville I find it one of the pleasantest [sic] villages I have seen in the south. It had a population of some five thousand before the rebellion but is reduced below that at present. It gives but little evidence of the devastations of war. White refugees were also aided by the Western Freedman's Aid Commission. Ibid., 7.

13 Clarksville, the county seat of Montgomery County, Tennessee, boasted a population estimated near 3,000 at the time of the Civil War. Situated on the Cumberland River, Clarksville provided a convenient shipping point for supplies for the surrounding area. See Julie Hodgson, A Comparison of Three Tennessee Urban Centers: Goodlettsville, Franklin and Clarksville (Nashville, 1939), 8.
has been about eight hundred coloured troops enlisted here and the women and children to the number of about twenty-five hundred are still here.

Seventh day, 1 month 23, 1864

Another beautiful spring day. The coloured people here, both residents and contrabands, are to all appearances as well dressed and clothed as they are at the north and if any thing is done for them here it should be in the way of instruction. At two o'clock attended a meeting of coloured inhabitants called by those who have come to establish schools amongst them. About two hundred in attendance young and old and they evinced a lively interest in the cause and the old men preferred to furnish fire wood and assist in repairing the college building which has been sadly abused nearly all the glass being broken out. About nine o'clock the Ladonia came up and I went aboard for Nashville expecting to arrive there by morning but she proved to be a slow running boat, and meeting with unexpected hindrances did not get there until the following morning.

Second day, the 25th of 1 month

A beautiful spring day. Finding no goods here yet and no instructions from the committee and apprehending there is nothing more that I can do to advantage in this department I have made arrangements with David M. Wilson to receive and distribute my goods and am preparing to leave for home tomorrow morning.

Third day, 26

Went to the train but found the cars entirely filled with soldiers.

Fourth day, 27

The passenger train again filled with soldiers but succeeded in getting into a fruit car which was not crowded and had a pleasant trip to Louisville.

15 Reports from this general area affirm Carpenter's remarks on the freedman's response to education. One teacher recalled: "I have never met with children so very eager to have it come to their turn to read, or equal to them in enduring cold and uncomfortable positions to have the privilege of saying their lessons." Appeal of the Western Freedman's Aid Commission in Behalf of the National Freedman (Cincinnati, 1864), 8.
THE CAMP OF THE CONTRABANDS ON THE BANKS OF THE MISSISSIPPI,
FORT PICKERING, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE
Fifth day, 28

Went on board the Major Anderson for Cincinnati at twelve o'clock, and reached home about 11 o'clock the night of the 29 finding all well. "Return unto thy rest O my soul for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee."16

2 month 5 [February 5, 1864]

Left home again with a view of revisiting the South on the 6 P.M. train. Took the Louisville packet 12 o'clock on the 6th and the 7 o'clock Nashville train on the 7 arriving in the evening.

Second day [Monday], 2 month 8

Called on Adjutant General Thomas17 who informed me that he had just issued an order to have tents prepared at some suitable location in this vicinity for five thousand contrabands and to have all who are not in a condition to care for themselves in the Department of the Cumberland18 removed to it, which if carried out, will center all our labour here for the present.

3 day, 2 month 9th 1864

Commenced the distribution of goods amongst the contrabands.19 Visited a number of houses in town and found a good deal of sickness and destitution. Also went out to a new camp just formed to which 140 came today with a dozen quilts a dozen over coats and a number of dresses for women and but found I had not near a supply. These have recently arrived from Stevenson, Alabama.

[Diary entries during the period from February 10 to February 25 are marked by merely routine comments upon the weather and are not substantive in nature.]

17 Brigadier General Lorenzo Thomas, former adjutant general of the United States, in March, 1863, took over the organization of Negro troops for the Union Army. A Seminole War veteran and Benjamin F. Butler's chief of staff during the Mexican War, he served as adjutant general of Union forces until he took over the organization of the Negro troops. Bantner, Civil War Dictionary, 837.
18 First established in August, 1861, the Department of the Cumberland included Tennessee and Kentucky. Later, in October, 1862, the department was altered to include Tennessee east of the Tennessee River and the portions of Alabama and Georgia under federal control. Ibid., 212.
19 Carpenter distributed somewhere in the neighborhood of 119 boxes of clothing and seed as well as cookstoves, tinware, buckets, and brooms. See Society of Friends, Minutes, 1864, p. 26.
6 day 26

In company with L. Pettyjohn started at 8 o'clock for Pulaski. Passed through Franklin and Columbia and as beautiful line of country probably the garden of Tennessee. A little before sundown when within some three miles of Pulaski the car next to the locomotive took fire and the train could not connect with the locomotive until it was consumed. Whilst waiting a couple of men rode up and entering into conversation with them I soon learned that they were connected with a contraband camp about a mile distant and I at once accepted their kind invitation to go and spend the night with them. I found near three hundred of them quartered in new cabins covered with clapboards held on by light poles, doors and floors of split timber and stick chimneys. I spent the night comfortably in one of these cabins and think them the most thrifty colony of contrabands. There are four other farms under the same superintendent Lt. Joseph W. Harris containing in all upwards of a thousand acres and the whole number of contrabands on the list is 920. They have been worked through the winter in picking cotton part of the time on shares and part of the time some field which had been confiscated and they allowed to pick it and put the proceeds in the contraband fund which now amounts to about 9,000 dollars. All the officers here connected with the subject are sound and work hearty and with a creditable interest. I wish I could say as much for them at Nashville.

Pulaski, 2 month 28, 1864

Went to Sabbath school at the Presbyterian church, 9. Attended service at convalescent hospital at 10 and in one of the wards of regular Hospital at 11. At 2½ went with W. Perkins to the meeting of the coloured Methodist which was large and respectable in appearance and demeanor.

2 month 28

Returned to Nashville. A tedious trip not getting in until 11 o'clock. All day without any thing to eat and car filled with profane drinking passengers many of them getting beastly drunk before night.

[Diary entries for the period March 1 to March 19 are composed of single line entries about routine visits, weather, and travel.]

20 Carpenter evidently misdated this or the preceding entry.
1st day [Sunday, March] 20 [1864]

In room consisting of Ira Bristol of Illinois, Lewis Pettyjohn of Ohio, Captain Hutchins of Michigan, Major R. Cramer of Iowa, Daniel Hill of Indiana and myself formed ourselves into a bible class spending an hour pleasantly and I hope profitably. Having a troublesome cough. I spent the balance of the day in the house.

2nd day [Monday], 3 month [March] 21

Spent the day mostly at the depository [warehouse].

3 day, 22

Received a letter from T. Nicholson, secretary of the Executive Committee in which they relieve me of the trip down the Mississippi which is intelligence more than welcome.

4 day 23

Spent the day in making preparations for leaving Nashville and took the train about half past four in the afternoon arriving at Louisville about 7 o'clock.

5th day, 24

Looking back over my association with the Freedman there are two prominent traits of character that are particularly observable.

One is the general absense of a feeling of revenge or spirit of retaliation towards those who have oppressed, and in some cases brutually maltreated them, and the other is the so frequent want of chastity amongst the females.

This is easily accounted for in the workings of the system of slavery, which renders the marriage contract a mockery, liable to be broken at any moment by the claiment of either party, and the females whether married or unmarried in many cases subject to beastly masters and overseers, whose will is law without appeal, one may say they are educated to prostitution, and I fear the present system of camp life in which two or three families of children, and frequently young men and women are huddled together in one tent, will not tend by any means to correct this great evil.

---

21 James and Sarah Smith of the Indiana Yearly Meeting were sent on this trip to aid the freedman. Society of Friends, Minutes, 1864, p. 19.