

November 3, 1863 - Problems associated with the growth in the African-American population in Nashville, and suggestions to improve the predicament



Nashville Tenn Nov. 3. [1863]

To his Excellency Andrew Johnston, Governor of Tennessee

The undersigned would respectfully represent, That the condition of the colored population in this city and especially of that portion of them whose condition has been changed by recent events, is such as to call for the serious consideration of all concerned. Their great and continually augmenting number renders it impossible for all to obtain remunerative employment in their accustomed sphere of labor or indeed in any other & thus many are thrown upon the charity of the citizens for their support & thus they have become a source of great & increasing annoyance, to say nothing of the burden, to the citizens. Or they must resort to crime for the means of subsistence, or perish. Neither of these alternatives is acceptable to any. They come also in competition with the white population, in part, for labor, thus inducing enmities & often actual collisions, unfavorable to the good order & good name of the city. They occupy old & decayed buildings, cellars & out-houses as dwellings & from the insufficiency of shelter & the scarcity & high price of fuel, suffering must ensue from their present condition. It is known also that in many cases, criminal connections are formed between the younger females & soldier of the Federal army, who, in many cases, have decoyed them from their former homes & are now living in more or less intimate relations with them to the literal demoralization of both & the military demoralization of the latter. This fact can be well attested, if any doubt remains.



Thus various considerations-regard for the comfort of the citizens, for the peace & good order of the city, for the welfare & efficiency of the soldiers & of the country in whose service they are, a consideration of the claims of humanity in reference to the class in question, unite in pressing the consideration of the problem now presented for solution-What is to be done with them?

Is not one thing now probable if not evident, that the comfort and benefit of both races require their separation & yet that such connection with the source of power be maintained as shall secure this class from want & at the same time secure to them adequate protection? May we not add another considerations-that of placing them under such circumstances that they shall be easily & readily accessible to efforts for their intellectual & moral improvement? Such results appear to be worth the enlightened concertino of the philanthropic & the powerful—the Statesmen & the Christian.

To us it appears that while the plan we suggest is not devoid of mighty objections, yet, on the whole, offers the great[est] benefits with the least drawback, It is that of forming them into a camp or camps under suitable regulations & superintendence & removed control of interference, except so far as may be necessary for their protection & that of those having charge of

them & bringing them under such intellectual & moral training as shall tend to fit them for greater efficiency in whatever sphere they may afterwards occupy, & render them safer members of society.



We, therefore, take the liberty of suggesting that whatever ultimate disposition may be made of them whether on plantations or otherwise, the interest of all parties, in the meantime, might be promoted by separating them from present corrupting influences, into a missionary camp, managed & taught by benevolent Christian enterprise & furnished in material support by the Government.



With 6 hours per day spent in school, half an hour, morning & evening in religious exercises & the remainder in cooking, washing & sewing under the direction of lady teachers, little time would be left for dissipation incident to a military camp. Thus many would acquire more correct ideas of self-respect and a taste for learning. From this camp they could be transferred from time to time as openings might be bound for them on plantations & elsewhere until all are disposed of.



DETAILS: As we represent an association of Christian people, who contemplate merely the moral & religious improvement of this class wherever we might find them, we have not the means of furnishing anything to the material support of such an enterprise, except teachers & a portion of the clothing needed by the "Contrabands."

Should the Government furnish rations to the members of the corps of teachers & some salary to the General Superintendent (one of ourselves) in consideration of his being diverted from the specific work to which he was designated, it would enable us to employ a sufficient force of teachers to carry on the various branches of instruction.

We should have to look to the Government for the fitting the camp & furnishing camp equipage, for rations necessary for the people & teachers, & Supt. and a commissary agent for the distribution of the same & barracks for the accommodation of teachers agent &c if necessary.^{Note 1}

With these suggestions, we leave this matter to your judicious & benevolent consideration, not doubting that the result will be for the benefit of all concerned.

With much respect, Yours

Joseph G. McKee, M. M. Brown.

Papers of Andrew Johnson, Vol. 6, pp. 450-451.

Note 1: These suggestions were apparently ignored by Johnson. A request by McKee during the winter of 1863-64 for tents to shelter the homeless contrabands was turned down by Johnson who said in reply "Anything that will tend to promote their comfort will increase the number flocking in and exasperate still more their haters and persecuters—thus increasing their

misery." It wasn't until February 1864 that Ajutant General Lorenzo Thomas established the city's first contraband camp. As cited in *Papers of Andrew Johnson*, Vol. 6, p. 452, fn 3.

