

A.W.T. PAPERS

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CHAUTAUQUA HISTORICAL SOCIETY 2013

Letter to Mr Armstrong
relating to the
Purchase of Land
for freedmen

Mr Armstrong

Sir:

You desired me to communi-
cate with you at Raleigh and put in more forma-
ment form my ideas in reference to the purchase
of lands by freedmen. In compliance with your re-
quest I find it necessary first to touch upon
several preliminary facts

- 1st Lands are abundant and cheap throughout this
state, embracing every variety of soil and
almost every shade of climate.
- 2nd The freedmen are anxious to buy, and nearly all
of them would purchase small farms, if they could
obtain near their old homes, at reasonable rates
and on a reasonable time.
- 3rd They have shown by ~~the~~ effort they have made to
pay for small lots and houses which they pur-
chased at extravagant rates, that they would
in the main be reliable purchasers of real estate.
Something over two hundred in this county, have
purchased farms, or houses and lots since the war
ended. Not over twenty have succeeded in pay-
ing for them, but it must be remembered that
these men purchased lands mostly in the vicinity
of towns, and paid from \$80, - to \$100 - per acre
for the lands. Of course lands for purposes of cul-
tivation could not be purchased at this rate.
These lots do not afford any particular aid to the
buyer in paying for themselves. They yield little or no
return.
- 4 - It is firmly impressed upon the minds of the
freedmen and, with justice to ~~them~~ that there is little

prospect of their ever owning farms, if they are compelled to pay the whole or a greater portion of the purchase money in cash at the time of purchase. If the freedmen must wait until he has acquired a sufficient capital by serving as a hireling it will be useless for him to attempt any such thing as land ownership on anything like general principles, for it must then be the exception and not the rule.

5- The highest good of the freedmen and of the country demands that as soon as practicable the great majority of them should become owners of the soil they now till. This proposition should not require any support to secure the endorsement of any honest man. It is as nearly self evident as any social moral or political problem can be.

7- If this state of affairs is not brought about by purchase and sale, it must of necessity come either by excessive taxation or confiscation.

8- The land owners have little if any confidence in the negro as a buyer and almost universally refuse to sell to him on time ^{or at a reasonable price.} The negroes as a rule have a strong reciprocal ^{feeling} ~~disposition~~ in regard to the land owners, and much dislike to purchase of them ^{paying a part of the purchase money} ~~giving a bond for a deed~~ down and taking a bond for a deed on payment of the remainder, as is the custom, which throws all the risk upon the purchaser.

9. It is necessary that some plan be devised, both to give confidence to the land owner in selling and to the freedman in buying. Although placed nominally upon a footing of equality before the law, the freedman is very far from being beyond the need of guardianship and aid, in many respects, at least, and in none more so than in the matter of land purchases. The necessary and unavoidable ignorance of the freedman in matters of business and legal forms, leaves them peculiarly exposed to those ~~people~~ particularly kind of fraud which lurks in concealment. And when he would seek a remedy, it is more than probable that his poverty will debar him from giving security for costs, and so the door of justice will be shut in his face at once. The courts are open enough, but the freedman can seldom afford to appear in them except as a defendant. The supervision of contracts by the Bureau last year, reaching as it did nearly all cases, saved an immense amount of trouble almost the only freedmen who were unable to get their ways were those unsupplied with Bureau Contracts. If the same care to supply written contracts and have them recorded, had been exercised by the Bureau officers this year, it would have prevented the trouble that is already beginning to develop itself. Had freedmen been advised to use contract forms drawn up by the Bureau and supplied to them at a reasonable rate, they would have refused to contract without them, and the consequence would have been to close the door against fraud. I believe that the experi-

rience of the present year will show that such a course will be necessary in the future. The written contract, acknowledged and recorded must be the basis of hiring hereafter. Of course it need not be compulsory, but it should be made cheaply accessible to the freedman, and when this is done, every one will avail themselves of it. Such a course would save to the freedman more every year than the aid Societies of the North give him during that time. It must be the same with the purchase of lands. If left to buy subject to the caprice or knavery of the land owner, they will be subject to the greatest imaginable fraud.

11 It is useless to think of locating the freedmen in communities by themselves. They prefer to live as now interspersed with the whites, the business interests of the people demand it and there is no doubt it will be done. continued.

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How then shall these difficulties be overcome and the freedmen be enabled to purchase lands cheaply, safely and immediately? The problem seems intricate yet upon investigation it becomes simple. All that the land owner requires is to be taught a little confidence in the negro as a purchaser. All that the freedman requires is to be protected from imposition on the part of the land holder, to have some one to investigate the title, draw the contingents, for him in whom he can rely and who will do it for a reasonable price.

My Plan then is this:

Let a ^{Freedmen's} Land Agency be established in each state, with branches in each county or as frequent as may be necessary, with a regular schedule of fees, approved by the Freedmen's Bureau, which shall ~~execute~~ execute contracts and execute and record papers for the freedmen.

Let an abstract of each sale giving names of parties, terms, time of execution, &c, be forwarded to the Bureau or to the secretary of the Freedmen's aid society - in order that there may be system and order in the transactions of the agency. Let this agency negotiate sales upon the following terms or similar ones viz: Let the purchaser pay the interest upon the price agreed upon ^{for one year} at the time of purchase, at the end of this year the interest for another year, at the end of the second year, the annual interest and one eighth of the principal - This will give ample time for the freedman to pay for his land and with the endorsement of the Bureau will give the proprietor confidence in the negro as a purchaser. Beyond this it will bring clearly to the attention of Northern Capitalists the astonishing opportunities which now exist for the profitable investment of capital in lands at the South. There are thousands of acres of our best lands which might be purchased - at from \$1.50.

to for \$5000 - per acre cash, which might
be resold at from \$60 to \$70 & upon
the terms before given to freedmen, and be
a good investment for both parties -
This should not be overlooked. Much of the
land now offered for sale is forced in
to the market by the exigencies of debtors
who must have cash to meet the claims
of their creditors - This makes land
unusually and wonderfully cheap to
the capitalist - Some effort must
however be made to attract the atten-
tion of capitalists to this mine of wealth
and I know of none better than
the plan proposed -

Hoping that this may meet
the approval of Gen. Howard and
that he may be induced to extend
his approval and assistance to the
plan, I remain

Very Respectfully
Your Obedt Servt
A. W. Thayer

P.S. It may not be improper to state that
I had become so impressed with the ne-
cessity of such an movement that I
had intended to establish such an agency
as there are hundreds of estimable
freedmen who are anxious to buy land
on such terms, all about me,
and trust to Gen. Howard's cooperation
afterward - A. W. Thayer