Freed People at New Bern

Shorty after the First Battle of Bull Run (Manassas), Vincent Colyer founded the United States Christian Commission to provide religious support to U.S. troops. After the Union victory at New Bern, General Burnside appointed Colyer “Superintendent of the Poor in the captured territory.” Colyer’s major responsibility was employing the thousands of slaves who had escaped to the Union lines, where they knew they would be free.

In 1864, Colyer published Brief report of the services rendered by the freed people to the United States Army, in North Carolina where he wrote about his experiences while living in North Carolina. In this excerpt, Colyer describes the number of slaves that fled to New Bern, their contribution to the Union war effort, and their gratitude to Union troops for liberating them from slavery. An excerpt of Colyer's Brief report is below.

I commenced my work with the freed people of color, in North Carolina, at Roanoke Island, soon after the battle of the 8th of February, 1862, which resulted so gloriously for our country.

A party of fifteen or twenty of these loyal blacks, men, women and children, arrived on a “Dingy” in front of the General's Head Quarters, where my tent was located. They came from up the Chowan River, and as they were passing they had been shot at by their rebel masters from the banks of the river, but escaped uninjured.

They were a happy party, rejoicing at their escape from slavery and danger, and at the hearty welcome which was at once extended to them, by the officers and men of the New England regiments, which chiefly made up the corps under Gen. Burnside's command.

It rained hard that night, and shelter being rather scarce on that Island, I gave up my tent to the women and children, and found quarters for myself with a neighbor.

The calm trustful faith with which these poor people came over from the enemy, to our shores; the unbounded joy which they manifested when they found themselves within our lines, and Free; made an impression on my mind not easily effaced. Many of the officers, notwithstanding the rain, gathered around the tent to hear them sing the hymn, “The precious Lamb, Christ Jesus, was crucified for me.”...

Their numbers in the Department of N. Carolina, Were As Follows;

- At Newbern and vicinity, 7,500
- At Roanoke Island and parts adjacent, 1,000
- At Washington, Hatteras, Carolina and Beaufort, 1,500

In all 10,000, of whom 2,500 were men, 7,500 women and children.

The work they did.

In the four months that I had charge of them, the men built three first-class earth-work forts: Fort Totten, at Newbern -- a large work; Fort Burnside, on the upper end of Roanoke Island; and Fort [?], at Washington, N. C. These three forts were our chief reliance for defence against the rebels, in case of an attack; and have since been successfully used for that purpose by our forces under Major-Generals Foster and Peck, in the two attempts which have been made by the rebels to retake Newbern.

The negroes loaded and discharged cargos, for about three hundred vessels, served regularly as crews on about twenty steamers, and acted as permanent gangs of laborers in all the Quartermasters, Commissary and Ordinance Offices of the Department. A number of the men were good carpenters, blacksmiths, cooperers, &c., and did effective work in their trades at bridge-building, ship-joining, &c. A number of the wooden cots in the hospital, and considerable of the blacksmith and wheelwright work was done by them. One shop in Hancock Street, kept by a freedman, of which the engraving on another page gives a fair picture, usually presented a busy scene of cheerful industry. The large rail road bridge across the Trent was built chiefly by them, as were also the bridges across Batchelor's and other Creeks, and the docks at Roanoke Island and elsewhere. Upwards of fifty volunteers of the best and most courageous, were kept constantly employed on the perilous but important duty of spies, scouts, and guides. In this work they were invaluable and almost indispensable. They frequently went from thirty to three hundred miles within the enemy's lines; visiting his principal camps and most important posts, and bringing us back important and reliable information. They visited within the rebel lines Kingston, Goldsboro, Trenton, Onslow, Swansboro, Tarboro and points on the Roanoke River: often on these errands barely escaping with their lives. They were pursued on several occasions by blood-hounds, two or three of them were taken prisoners; one of these was known to have been shot, and the fate of the others was not ascertained. The pay
they received for this work was small but satisfactory. They seemed to think their lives were well spent, if necessary, in
giving rest, security and success to the Union troops, whom they regarded as their deliverers. They usually knelt in
solemn prayer before they left, and on their return from these hazardous errands, as they considered the work as a
religious duty.

**Their services as spies.**

One morning, in the beginning of this pioneer duty, the provost Guard in front of my door told me that two negro spies sent
by the rebels into our lines, had been caught by our *pickets* [11]. I had sent two men to Kingston, with instructions that they
should report only to me; on their return they were examined by the pickets and officers of the outposts, who, ignorant of
our doings in this way, and completely mystified by the negroes, sent the two men under strong guard to General Foster.
The General himself, not having been told by General Burnside of the authority which had been given to me, of sending
out men on these hazardous errands, was going by my door at the time the guard were passing with these men. For convenience
he brought them into my office; when, to my astonishment I found that the noted negro prisoners, of whom I had heard
early in the morning were my two men. So faithful were they to my order, that though subjected to suspicion and indignity
all the morning, from their own friends, they had not betrayed their trust....

The name of one of these two faithful men who thus opened the way for the carrying on of this important service—was
Furney Bryant. At that time now two years ago, he did not know a letter of the alphabet, and he came within our lines
dressed in the rags of the *plantation* [12]. He attended my schools and after I left Newbern, on the formation of the 1st
North Carolina Colored Reg't, he enlisted, and with his regiment was ordered for duty with General Gilmore off Charleston;
where his gallantry and intelligence caused him to receive the appointment of 1st Sergeant, and a leave of absence of
thirty days. On his way home to Newbern he came to New York city and called on me. The contrast in his personal
appearance, in his new suit of Army blue, was not more remarable than the following letter received from him since his
return to duty, proves his growth in the knowledge of letters to be. Let no one say that freedom is not better than slavery,
with such examples before them.

In company with three other soldiers of his regiment, he arrived in Newbern in time to participate in the defence of that
place against the recent desperate attack of the rebels in February, 1864. The engraving represents him, in company with
Corporal Owen Jones heroically defending his native town, and the government which had set him free, against the
secessionists.

**Sergeant Bryant’s Letter.**


My Dear friend, Mr. Colyer,

In a few lines, I will inform you that I am in good health. I am happy in having the pleasure of writing to you while studying
over all the care and affection which you have shown towards the colored people. I do say, and truly believe, that you will
have your reward in Heaven.

I hope that God will prosper you in all your undertakings and that you may forever find pleasure in your duties, looking
unto God.

I trust to meet you and your kind brother-in-law, Mr. Geo. Hancock, in this world, but if I should not, then I hope to meet
you in Heaven.

It was my desire to have called upon you again before I left New York, but the steamer left so hurriedly we could not.
Sergeant Lewis Bryant, Corporal Owen Jones, William White and John Hatch send their love. Bringing my letter to a
close, in reading over all I have written I can only say, *Amen*.

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Sergeant Furney Bryant

For Teachers:

Black Soldiers in the Civil War, from the National Archives

Related Topics:

Contrabands, the term given to enslaved people who escaped to freedom through Union lines.

Battle of Roanoke Island, the February 8, 1862 battle discussed by Colyer.

Primary Sources:
TO COLORED MEN!

FREEDOM
Protection, Pay, and a Call to Military Duty!

On the 1st day of January, 1863, the President of the United States proclaimed Freedom to over Three Millions of Slaves. This decree is to be enforced by all the power of the Nation. On the 21st of July last he issued the following order:

PROTECTION OF COLORED TROOPS.

"WAR DEPARTMENT, ARMY DEPARTMENT ORDER;
Washington, July 21st.

"The following order of the President is published for the information and guidance of all concerned:

EXECUTIVE MANSION, Washington, July 21st.
"...It is the duty of every Government to give protection to all persons in their persons, rights, and property, without distinction of color or race. To all who seek the protection of the law, the same protection shall be given, without regard to the color of their skins. This order will be enforced by all the officers of the Government, who are charged with the duty of maintaining public order and preserving the peace of the community.

"By order of the Secretary of War,
H. R. SEWARD, Assistant Adjutant General.

That the President is in earnest the rebels soon began to find out, as witness the following order from his Secretary of War:

"WAR DEPARTMENT, Washington City, Aug. 3, 1863.

"Respectfully your obedient servant,
H. R. SEWARD, Assistant Adjutant General.

AND DESTRUCTION WILL BE BY THE LATTER END.

LETTER OF CHARLES SUMNER,
Written with reference to the Circular issued by the President, July 15th and 21st, 1863, to provide Colored Relief.

[Letter Text]

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