

THE AMERICAN FREEDMEN'S AID COMMISSION--ITS ORIGIN.

Very early in the war, public attention was directed to the condition of slaves escaping into our military lines beyond the control of their former masters. The attitude of these masters toward the Government of the United States, when contrasted with the uniformly opposite attitude of the incoming bondmen, suggested to not a few minds some practical measures looking toward the welcome of those who, although owing the Government for individual benefits undoubtedly less than any other class in the Republic, manifested from the instant the standard of rebellion was raised the most perfect loyalty the world has ever seen.

The most, however, were too far distraught with the surprises and perplexities of the hour, or too full of long-cherished prejudices, to give these refugees much thought; and have so continued to the present time.

There were not lacking those, however, in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago and elsewhere, who, inheriting the Good Samaritan's temper, went after the needy with kindly care. Organizations grew up at all these centres, and found generous constituencies in adjacent territory. The movement gradually capitalized itself in a natural manner, and on the 24th of August, 1865, the American Freedmen's Aid Commission was organized in the city of New York by the formal or informal representatives of seven local societies, to wit:

- The New England Freedmen's Aid Society.
The New York National Freedman's Relief Association.
The Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association.
The Baltimore Association for the Moral and Educational Improvement of the Colored People.
The Freedmen's Aid Association of Western Pennsylvania and adjacent parts of Ohio and Western Virginia.
The Western Freedmen's Aid Commission.
The Northwestern Freedmen's Aid Commission.

At an adjourned meeting, held on the 19th of September, the formal adhesion of the societies not formally represented at the first meeting was certified, and the organization thereby completed.

On the 28th of September, the first meeting of the Board of Managers was held in New York, at which the necessary steps were taken for the initiation of efficient executive action, and a clause inserted in the Constitution providing that the first meeting of the Commission should be held in the city of Philadelphia on the 11th of October, and subsequent meetings as the Commission itself should then determine.

FIRST SESSION OF THE COMMISSION.

The Commission convened, accordingly, at the rooms of the Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association, 424 Walnut street, at 10 o'clock in the forenoon, the President in the chair.

A committee, consisting of Mr. Garrison, Dr. Walden, and the President, was appointed to prepare and publish an address to the public, which will shortly appear.

Several select committees were raised, to whom sundry topics were referred for consideration and report.

The subsequent action of the Commission is embodied in the several series of resolutions that follow:—

PURPOSE AND POLICY.

Whereas, through the rightful exercise of the war power for our national safety, the entire abolition of slavery in the so-called Southern Confederacy was decreed by the American Government; and,

Whereas, an extensive enlistment of the able-bodied freedmen of the South in the army of the United States was stimulated and secured by the Government for the speedy suppression of the rebellion, and without whose augmenting numbers and heroic services the terrible conflict might have been indefinitely prolonged; and,

Whereas, the American Government, by thus freeing, arming and employing this class, not primarily for their benefit, but for its own preservation, has placed them in a position of great peril, in consequence of the bitterness and anger naturally engendered toward them in the breasts of their late owners in special, and of the Southern white population in general, and therefore has occurred obligations and assumed duties in regard to their rights as a people which it cannot disregard or evade without heinous criminality; therefore,

Resolved, That, in the judgment of the Commission, in the work of reconstructing and admitting to the Union the late rebellious States, it is the solemn duty of the Government, rising above all party and sectional considerations, and honorably discharging its obligations to those by whose valor it has been upheld, to impose such conditions as shall make the institutions of the country homogeneous, and thus to give free course to the cause of education and religion, as well as to place the American Union upon an enduring basis.

Resolved, That this Commission deems the crisis too momentous to suppress the expression of its fears—fears based upon sufficient data—that unless such guarantees are secured, and such safeguards erected, no protection or countenance will be given, at the South, to the instruction of its freed population, and thus the beneficent movement now making in their behalf will be paralyzed by statutory enactments or popular violence, and they left to perish in their ignorance.

Resolved, That this Commission is organized to prosecute with unremitting zeal and vigor the education of the freedmen of the South, and that those who support it, and unite with its efforts, feel, since by the will of the American Government, a people has been emancipated, they are bound by every consideration of honor and justice to see that they are furnished the means with which to secure, maintain and enjoy the rights belonging to their new condition.

Resolved, That while we rely on the representatives of the loyal people of the United States to take such measures as will secure the rights of freedom to the freedmen of the South, nevertheless, come what will, the determination of the Commission is to prosecute its labor under all circumstances, and to press forward the good work, relying on the Providence which has brought us through this unprecedented contest, and upon the integrity and benevolence of the people who have prosecuted that contest to the end.

Resolved, That notwithstanding the spirit of some of our fellow-citizens of the Southern States, who, since the authority of the Government has been withdrawn, have forbidden our teachers to perform their duties among the freedmen of their localities, we hope that they in time will discover they are warring against their best interests, and that educated labor is better than ignorant toil, and that he best secures his own rights who most liberally consents to the exercise of those of his neighbor.

THE FREEDMEN'S BUREAU.

Resolved, That we call upon Congress to maintain and support the Freedmen's Bureau, because we consider the freedmen of the South as the wards of the country until their civil rights as citizens are permanently established by the laws of the several States.

Resolved, That this Commission desires to express the pleasure it has in the appointment of Major General O. O. Howard as the Head of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands; its implicit confidence in his fitness for the position, and its earnest hope that he will have such support from the Government and the people as may be necessary to give the fullest effect to his labors.

THOROUGH AND UNIFORM ORGANIZATION.

Whereas, the magnitude of the work contemplated by this Commission is of such colossal proportions as to demand the widest and most efficient co-operation; therefore,

Resolved, That it is the conviction of this Commission, that the immediate formation of State Freedmen's Aid Commissions throughout the country, North and South, with local auxiliary associations, and in harmonious co-operation with this body, is a highly desirable and important measure; and it therefore urges the consideration thereof upon the attention of the friends of the freedmen in the several States of the Union.

Resolved, That in order to secure the great work of benevolence and justice now demanded in behalf of the freedmen, the strength of harmonious action, and all other advantages of a national organization, it is very desirable that all local Freedmen's Aid Societies become auxiliary to either the Eastern or Western Department of the American Freedmen's Aid Commission, according to their location.

Resolved, That to give unity to the work in behalf of the Freedmen, and to secure other objects for which this Commission was organized, we recommend to the societies which are constituents of the departments, to adopt the title of State or local Freedmen's Aid Commissions.

TO THE CHURCHES.

Resolved, That inasmuch as the successful operation of the Government Bureau of Freedmen at Washington and of the American Freedmen's Aid Commission in protecting this class of American citizens in their civil rights, and securing their education and Christian advancement must depend in a large measure upon the cordial and earnest co-operation of all denominations of American Christians; therefore,

Resolved, That we respectfully invoke the effective aid and sympathy of all Christians in the holy work of lifting up the freedmen of the South from their present ignorance and degradation, and fitting them for the rights and duties that will hereafter devolve upon their race in the moral, social and political economy of this Republic.

Resolved, That our President and Secretary be requested to communicate the foregoing resolutions to the Presiding Head of the House of Bishops, and to the President of the House of Clerical and Lay Delegates of the Protestant Episcopal Church now in session in this city, and to other religious bodies that may convene.

TO FOREIGN FRIENDS.

Resolved, That it is the grateful duty and privilege of this Commission to acknowledge with sincere thanks the brotherly sympathy in our work manifested by the several foreign aid societies in Great Britain and on the continent of Europe, as well as the efficient and timely aid rendered by them to the cause of the freedmen and humanity, by their liberal contributions in money and material.

We thank them for the assistance heretofore extended to the various local and State societies, now forming integral parts of this Commission, and assure them that our present comprehensive organization will enable us to render any future contribution from them still more effective for the education and elevation of the freed people throughout the whole of our country.

SELF-HELP.

Resolved, That the freedmen of the South should be encouraged to support the schools established for their benefit among them, to the extent of their ability.

The Commission adjourned at noon on the 12th, to meet on Thursday, November 9th. The sessions were characterized by earnestness and freedom of debate, with perfect unanimity in conclusions.

A public meeting was held on the evening of the 11th in the Academy of Music, at which not less than four thousand persons were supposed to be present. The audience seemed surcharged with generous enthusiasm, responding to the earnest utterances of the eloquent speakers with ever more earnest applause.

The venerable Bishop McIlvaine, President of the Western Department, presided at the opening of the exercises, introducing the Rev. Dr. Yarnall, who offered prayer.

The Bishop then addressed the audience briefly, but with great fervor, and introduced Bishop Simpson, the President of the Commission, who made a succinct and comprehensive statement of the origin and purposes of the Commission, and of its confidence in the abundant support of all loyal citizens.

Mr. J. M. McKim, Secretary of the Eastern Department, read the following letter from Gen. Howard:—

WAR DEPARTMENT, BUREAU OF REFUGEES, FREEDMEN AND ABANDONED LANDS, WASHINGTON, Oct. 9, 1865.

MY DEAR SIR: I have just received your kind letter, and hasten to reply. By judicious effort, very much may be done in the way of education in the South. The want of money, the peculiar habits of a lifetime, and the prejudices necessarily existing, render the Southern communities for the most part unprepared to educate their poor, both white and black. Education underlies every hope of success for the freedman. This education must, of course, extend rather to the practical arts than to theoretical knowledge.

Every thing depends on the youth and the children being thoroughly instructed in every industrial pursuit. Through education, embracing moral and religious training, the fearful prejudices and hostility against the blacks can be overcome. They themselves will be able to demand and secure both privileges and rights that we have now difficulty to guarantee; therefore I earnestly entreat benevolent associations to leave no stone unturned to give them the opportunities for gaining knowledge.

I would enjoy being with you at your meeting in Philadelphia, but my orders carry me in the other direction. Do everything you possibly can for the elevation of the freedmen. My impression is, that hundreds, and perhaps thousands of Southern people would be able to aid you if they were approached in the right way. They acknowledge their necessities, and, as in Louisiana, a large number of native teachers will work for wages.

I am often asked what I can do in the way of aid. My answer is, "Not much." I must turn to the societies now, and ask them what they can do to aid me.

What are the people willing to do to secure the blessings almost within our grasp—the blessings of substantial freedom and enduring peace? Whether in a moral or political point of view, I believe that every thinking man is ready to admit that we will stand or fall as a nation, according as we are true to principle—according to our fidelity to the trusts evidently committed to us.

Very truly yours, O. O. HOWARD, Major General. JAMES E. RHODES, Secretary.

A letter was also read from George H. Stuart, Esq., highly approving of the objects of the association. He said:

"The object of your meeting is one which cannot fail to commend itself to the heart of every true Christian, patriot, and philanthropist. The providence of God, in overruling the late terrible contest for some of the most wise and beneficent purposes, has brought before the American people no problem of greater import than that which relates to the freedmen of the South. It is to the great work of improving their condition, physically, socially, morally and intellectually, that the energies of the country should now be, in a great measure, directed. This is a duty which we owe to them, a debt which it is obligatory for us to pay.

Through long years of unrequited and involuntary toil, suffering all the horrors of servitude, they added

by their forced yet productive labor to the material wealth of the country, and thereby identified themselves with the advancement of its material prosperity. Add to this the fact, that in the recent struggle with slavery, their blood was freely shed with that of their compatriots in other portions of our land, and their claim to the considerate care of our land, and of the patriot must be conceded. They stand before us to-day with the chains of slavery broken. They demand as a right, in the name of justice and humanity, that we do something to destroy the effects of their long and bitter years of oppression and bondage, fastened upon them by unholy legislation. We shall be recreant in our duty to God and our country if this appeal is despised. We are to educate the freedman; we are to prepare him for taking the advance step from the status of the freedman to that of the freeman, and to exercise the privileges of such. By our conduct as well as our professions, we are to evidence our belief in that fundamental truth of the great charter of our freedom, "all men are created free and equal."

In our efforts, and in our successes in this direction, we will at the same time be doing much to hasten the period when an unholy and unchristian prejudice, now so sadly predominant, against our colored population, shall be crushed out, and the divine principle acknowledged, as relating even to them who are the poorest and most lowly of earth: "All things whatsoever that men should do to you, do ye even so to them."

[For the speeches of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher and Rev. Dr. Bellows, made on the occasion, see our last page.]