The View From The Bottom Rail

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Emancipation and the Historical Debate Over Black Freedom

After the defeat of the Confederates in the Civil War of America (Apr 12, 1861 – May 13, 1865), black Africans who were slaves to the Confederates were freed. The lives after freedom have been studied over time by many researchers who have come to various conclusions. The combined results from studies have been highly equivocal since the claims from different schools of thought have remained contradictory. This text investigates the prior research done, the problems with the findings of the research, and the questions that must be answered to establish the credibility of the research.

The indicated text tries to explore these answers through a retrospection of archives. Although it admits that the lives of black slaves had improved after freedom, the emphasis is laid upon the authentication of sources. “The View from the Bottom Rail” signifies the sense of independence that the slaves had been experiencing after the war, as the archives reveal. The slaves are portrayed as becoming more casual and as exhibiting victory toward the previous masters. However, the writer views this investigation as being exaggerated and biased in favour of the Union to portray their protagonist side.

The text is a complex one since it tries to find the facts from established history. The first part narrates how pleased the slaves were with the arrival and conquest of the territory in which they lived by the Union. They have been shown dancing and singing in recognition of the Union victory. In such studies, the narrators have added opposite reactions, too, so that the reader does not see the narration with suspicion. A similar text (Brown) shows that the black population is getting stable in the post-war scenario. A combination of these studies shows people relieved by the occupation of the Upper South by the Union Army. These people were largely given funny names, which they later changed to assume a proper identity.

The contradiction to the established beliefs mentioned above bases the argument upon the authenticity of the investigation. These views object to the interviews conducted and the notes written to consolidate the position. This objection raises suspicion around primary sources, indicating the underrepresentation of some regions, especially the Upper South, where black population density was the highest. Other sources in an endorsement of this viewpoint object to the age group of the ones being surveyed. One source adds evidence of rewarding people for the biased conduction of surveys (Helton et al.).

The Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Meaning of Liberation

To investigate further, an analysis of the historical perspective is necessary by traversing through the events and searching for their impartiality. The Civil War hit the United States following the victory of President Abraham Lincoln in the 1860 elections. The understandable reason for war is the lack of consensus about freeing African Black slaves and providing them with the rights they enjoyed by the White community referred to as Yankees. The war was fought for four years between the Union Army that controlled the northern and Western parts of the United States and the newly-born Confederate Army that was largely present in Upper South regions between North Carolina in the East to the farthest end of Texas in the West. New Mexico was partially controlled.

The African slaves were used to working under their masters. Most of the masters in the Confederate region were associated with agriculture, and hence, slaves used to work in fields. Some of them were taught by their masters, and as the sources describe, a huge number of people wanted to learn reading and writing (Trowbridge). Some of those who were not allowed opted to learn without informing their masters. Such slaves were deceptive to their masters as being illiterate. Some teachers, both black and white, from missionaries volunteered to teach the emancipated black population in the Upper South region.

During the war, a significantly large number of slaves switched their loyalty in favour of Union soldiers, but some remained with their previous masters. The reason for the switch is believed to have become free of slavery since the Union defied it, whereas the reason for retaining loyalty is given to be the fear of an unknown community and, at times, expectations of reward. Another reason for slaves to stay loyal to their masters was the belief that it was their duty to fulfil what masters demanded because the survival of slaves was dependent upon their masters' stability (Helton et al.).

Historical Sources and Postwar African American Life

Primary sources in the post-war decade and secondary sources later have tried to give an account of black lives immediately after the war and a few decades later. Some of these sources highlighted the improvements in lives by citing their standards of living, self-respect, general reputation, prospects of getting work and business rights. The conception that they started to give proper names to them accounts for the fact that freedom was exhibited (Brown).

The studies also uncover that some former slaves did not consider slavery as bad because they believed in serving their masters, who fed them and enabled them to survive. The free and unhindered migration of the emancipated population gives a clue that the war had relieved this chunk

of the population. A decade after the war ended, liberated people began to own businesses, too. Though they obtained property rights later, documents prove that black people from relatively privileged backgrounds owned lands, too. However, such examples are rarely found in the Southern Mid-Atlantic region.

The rebuttal to these views comes with the study of archives, which included interviews and surveys conducted by freed people of those times to get closer to the actual course of events. The studies suggest that the notion of "freedpeople" was unfounded as the black population was still considered inferior after the freedom under people from the Union. This is reflected in the fact that coloured people, especially the Black community, were denied their share of lands and jobs while the educated class managed to do better, but illiterate and ignorant groups remained underprivileged (Helton et al.). Freedpeople chose their spokesperson, who belonged to an educated class, and they preferred to favour the people from their class or status (Masur).

Persistent Inequality and the Limits of Freedom

Furthermore, an examination has gone as far as calling the situation of freedpeople as post-war slavery. It adds further that a comparison of the post-war situation with contemporary times reveals that freedom was not realized in its true essence. The same race that had been slaves enjoys the freedom of expression, opinion and actions. These privileges were not enjoyed by the post-war slaves. Before and during the war times, slaves served as the labour force for the Confederacy. The potential change of loyalty could result in the weakened Confederacy units.

At this point, some deliberation is needed over some questions. Is the authentication of archives and research established as credible? What can be a plausible motive for the writers' stance? Was the writing done under any conditions from the external force? Are there any discrepancies in the archives?

By and large, these questions remained unanswered because the impartiality of most writers, editors and researchers who have contributed in this area cannot be established. The sources explored in the text either support one conception or the other. The disparity of thoughts is significant, but there is no clear victor. However, in contemporary times, while slavery in the United States has been eliminated, the disparity between the lives of the black population and those of others is substantially reduced.

Works Cited

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