

From *The Mirror*

(The punctuation and spelling are as they appeared in the original document.)

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RAMBLES AMONG THE NEGRO CABINS OF WASHINGTON

The *National Intelligencer* publishes a lengthy article on the condition of the negroes now congregated in Washington, from which we take the following extracts. Their prospects are gloomy enough, certainly:

The colored people of this city are an *institution*. The war has poured a great flood of them upon us. With every advancing stop of our armies, gathering up great bales of articles that seemed most desirable to them from their own domiciles and from the houses of their masters, they made their way to Washington, the Mecca of their imaginations, under the impression that freedom and plenty were to be attained by reaching it. They came by tens and by hundreds. The old and the decrepit, the young and helpless, the middle-aged and strong.

They knew little, but they dreamed much of what would be the result of the sudden and unprovided for change in their condition. It was a leap in the dark; but they imagined it a leap from darkness into light—from a state of bondage into the glorious condition of freedom; and they naturally considered that they would be the recipients of the blessings that such a change should produce.

They found themselves strangers in a strange land—destitute and despised; and pinched by hunger and faint with the reaction of stimulated imaginations, they began to grope their way into alleys and by-ways, and stable-lofts and rude hovels; and so became, TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND of them, denizens of the American metropolis.

How they have lived, how they have suffered, how they have died, will never be written.

We find a great portion of them in what are denominated “rows,” generally made of the cheapest lumber, and covered with felt and tar and divided into apartments, some 12 by 14 feet in dimensions, and rented for \$4, \$5, and \$6 per room or “cabin.” The actual cost of the rooms was from \$40 to \$100 each, (rarely exceeding the latter sum,) and the rent already paid have, in many instances, exceeded the entire outlay in erecting them.

On Eleventh street east the cabins are covered with rough siding, the roofs are of felt and tar, and the floors of coarse, unmatched board; but the doors are paneled—a feature quite uncommon. A single room is occupied by a family and in many instances two or three families are crowded into the same apartment.

In the vicinity of G street south, between Fourth and Fifth east, there is a group of “rows” some of them perched upon posts, some consisting of double rows of rooms some eight by ten feet in dimensions, and all with sunken roofs that freely admit the rain, and all with floors better adapted for ventilation than for keeping small children off from the ground; and here the price of rent is put at \$1.

Lent’s row, on H street south, between South Capitol and First street, contains the only rooms plastered or furnished with conveniences for cooking; but his row on South Capitol street is as wretched as any in the city. In the neighborhood of the brick yards near the Arsenal there are a cluster of tenements, and a building used for a church and school house, erected by the Scotch Presbyterians. Here rooms are \$2 each, and the children of all this section enjoy the privilege of free day and Sunday schools. Male and female teachers are kept in constant employment, and the station called a mission. On K, L, and M streets south, between Second and Four-and-a-half streets west, is a settlement containing some thousands of inhabitants, called Fredericksburg, and here the occupants own the house, paying one dollar per month ground rent

Further west the Island is studded with the same sort of cabins, and north of the avenue, in the vicinity of the corrals and the original Contraband Camp, all sorts and sizes of them may be found, wedged in every

conceivable shape into vacant spaces and yards and alley.

How such a multitude live and obtain clothing is a question for the curious.

They have no conveniences for cooking or washing—an old broken stove, placed outside on the common, suffices for several families. In many instances a rude furnace built of broken brick, on the top of which is placed a kettle, takes the place of the stove; and a line stretched out on the common, and watched by the children is the clothes dryer. All day, boys and girls and the old and infirm delve in gutters, among piles of rubbish and cinders, on the wharves, and in the trail of wood and coal carts, for bits of fuel, which they carry home in old grain sacks that they have picked up about the camp.

Their clothing is also gathered to a great extent in the same manner. Boys of twelve to eighteen may be seen in uniforms of full grown men. “Soldier clothes” seem to be the rage, regardless of fits. Their wages and the offering of the charitable supply them with a bare subsistence, and thus they live from day to day, without knowing from what source tomorrow’s supplies are to come.

If such be their summer condition, what are they to do through the coming winter? Their sufferings last winter were most intense; but then there was abundance of Government employment. During the next season woodcutting, boat-loading and unloading, driving, hauling, and labor about the corrals will almost cease, and the thousands that were thus employed will be out of work.