



Bringing Northwestern Virginia's History
into the Classroom

It happened near me . . .

Pieces of the Past from Where *I* Live

County: Berkeley and Jefferson (now WV) **Date:** 1866

Topic : Reconstruction and the Education of Freedmen

Background: By 1866, one-room schools for the African-

American freedmen were popping up all over Northern Virginia, often doubling as churches. Some were built with assistance from the Freedman's Bureau. The teachers were most frequently sent by Quakers or Northern Baptists, often well-meaning, hopeful young women. Loudoun county had several of these schools, the most notable taught by local Quaker girl Sarah Steer at Waterford. Sarah Jane Foster another young woman from Maine--age 26--taught at such a school in nearby Martinsburg and across the river from Loudoun in Harpers Ferry. *She* penned wonderful diary entries and wrote regular letters home that let us know what it was like. Here are two samples.

Monday, March 12 [1866]—A delicious day—only misty, very warm and Spring like . . . I have got some a-b-c scholars in [to] spell. So irritating to drill such ones. I got tired and vexed . . . Tonight our minister disappointed us so we had a small but good prayer meeting . . . The meeting closed in a “shout” and, it being payday on the [Baltimore & Ohio] railroad, that drew some drunken rowdies around. One caught me by the arm as I went out. I got away, and put the colored folks between us in a hurry. Some pistol shots were fired near our meeting time. But we did not mind them at all.

Tuesday March 13 [1866]--. . . The subject of building a church is in serious contemplation, and will, I think, be brought to a successful issue during the summer. Thursday night the colored people are to have the Methodist church, and after preaching, they will circulate a subscription paper for the purpose of building the church. Some white people here will doubtless aid them. In fact, it is not the refined and wealthy who are the most bitter, but the lower classes—those who in habits and education are but little, if any superior to them. As one of my pupils remarked: “T’aint those who used to own servants who are so hard on us, but them that never had none.” My observation inclines me to this opinion, but yet I feel that the cause will move on. The black race will not again be enslaved, though years may lapse before they can take their rightful place. Just now education is their aim, and nothing will be suffered to hinder them in its pursuit. As I look back, I am astonished at some of the progress my scholars have made. True, some need driving to learn, others need strict discipline, which is difficult in a crowded room, but yet I see progress, and mean, God helping me, to persevere till Providence shall close the door now open to me here. I never was in a work that so thoroughly aroused my whole being and gave life such a zest . . .

Making Sense of Evidence from the Past.

1. When Northern girls went South to teach people who had until recently been held as slaves, how did they likely feel about slavery? How had they viewed African-Americans before coming to Virginia? How had they learned what they were like?
2. Miss Foster seems annoyed having to drill her students. Do you think she came South knowing what teaching would be like? Does she have realistic expectations?
3. A prayer meeting ended in a “shout” which attracted white “rowdies.” What was a “shout” among African-American churchgoers? How would Miss Foster likely have responded as a young white woman from a far-away culture in Maine?
4. Why do the white “rowdies” finishing work at the railroad harass Sarah Jan Foster on her way home? How is *she* a threat to *them*?
5. Why would local white people help freedmen raise money for their own church?
6. One of Sarah Jane Foster’s African-American former slave pupils remarked to her, “T’aint those who used to own servants who are so hard on us, but them that never had none.” Consider two reasons why this might be.
One-
Two-
7. Miss Foster says, “the black race will not again be enslaved.” What is their aim *now*?



Living History inside a Freedman's Bureau School—Second St. School, Waterford

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WATERFORD FOUNDATION.



Second Street School at Waterford, a Freedman's Bureau School, ca. 1867



Mount Olive Church, Leesburg, built 1866-67—Freedmen's School was upstairs.