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Teacher of the Freedmen

Sarah Jane Foster

With the ending of the Civil War, many Northerners journeyed south seeking a wide range of personal goals. Some sought political power in the newly organized southern Republican Party or economic opportunity in what they hoped would be a modernizing South. Others pursued far more idealistic goals. Sarah Jane Foster's diary and letters are among the few autobiographical writings supplying the personal dimension to the great story of the hundreds of Northerners—the majority of them women—who went south during and after the Civil War to educate former slaves. Foster, born in a country town in Maine in 1839, struggled as an educator and missionary in Martinsburg, West Virginia, and Harper's Ferry, Virginia, to win over both blacks and whites. She struggled with rowdies and vandals who attacked her school and was criticized even by her missionary brethren for turning for protection to the African American men who accompanied her through the streets after school or religious services. We have no later reflections from Foster about how her experiences in the South affected her because she died of yellow fever in 1868.

BEFORE YOU READ

1. How would you describe Foster's attitude toward her black students?
2. What evidence can you find in her letters of white attitudes toward her work in Martinsburg?
3. Why did Foster and the farm woman who gave her party water have such different attitudes toward the battlefield at Antietam?
4. How did Foster's perceptions of both whites and blacks change while teaching in the South?

Martinsburg, West Va., Feb. 11th, 1866

Dear Advocate [a Maine Newspaper]:—

My day school . . . is growing larger. Its list is now seventy, while the night list approaches fifty. By the aid of the older scholars I have succeeded in cutting off about an hour and a half from my daily labors, but, even then, I spend not less than forty-two hours per week in the school-room, counting my Sabbath school and the meetings that I attend. Yet I am wonderfully sustained.—With all the changefulness of the climate and the humidity of the air, I find the place healthy, and never enjoyed better health anywhere. There has been no further disturbance, and I now walk home alone though the soldiers are yet in town, for I think it better to show no distrust. I understand that it was reported in the Baltimore American that our school was disturbed by returned rebel soldiers. I am not aware that such was in any instance the case, and think it but just to say I anticipate no trouble from them.

I spoke of good spelling in my last letter. Week before last a boy of sixteen, named Willoughby Fairfax, who chanced to recite alone, spelled seventy-five long words and only missed *two*. At the beginning of the year he was in words of four letters. He is one of my best pupils but not the best in spelling as good as he is. A girl of thirteen bears off the palm in that branch.

I now have several who are making creditable progress in cyphering, not to mention the boys who do easy sums on their slates, which I set to relieve the tedium of study. I have also several very good pupils in Geography, and actually hear some as good map lessons as I could expect to at home. Quite a number are learning fast to write. A great many are in Mental Arithmetic. I even have one small class in the night school who recite in the old but good Colburn's Arithmetic, which quite carries me back to my early school-days again. I have met with two copies each of Webster's and Town's spelling Books. Those most common are Comly's, which are not so good as either of the above. But, in spite of all the disadvantages, the scholars are bound to prove their capacity to learn. They are usually fond of school, and punctual in attendance, and, as a class, orderly on the street.

I daily become more and more interested in the school, and in all that concerns the welfare of the colored people here.

Martinsburg, W. Va., Feb. 28th, 1866

Dear Advocate:—Again I snatch a few minutes to pen a short report of my school and its affairs. We are having now I judge about the fullest school that we shall have at all. The weather of late has been such as to allow the small children to come, and young men and women, who will soon be out at service for the summer, are now improving the time to come to school for a while. Even now the schools begin to change a little. The day school for a week or two has diminished a little, and the other has proportionately increased. One after another they come to me with the remark "Miss Jenny, I can't come to day-school anymore, I'm going to work, but I'll come at night," and they do so all that they can. The boy to whose spelling I alluded in my last will not be able to come any more than this week, for his father has bought a farm in the country and has work for him now: I regret to lose so good a scholar, but he will not fail to do well anywhere.

The cognomen¹ of "nigger teacher" seems to have died out, and I occasionally hear my own name as I pass in the street, or, more frequently some person is notified that "there goes the Freedmen's Bureau." I have not met with any annoyance on the street but once, and then a white man addressed an insolent remark to me as I was going into the school-room door. I don't mind such things at all. Report has married or engaged me several times to men connected with the school, and, Mrs. Vosburgh was actually asked by a neighbor the day I was there "if I was not part nigger." I hope they will believe it, for

1. cognomen: nickname.

then surely they could not complain of my teaching the people of my own race. But Rev. Mr. Osborne preaches at our school room tonight, and I must prepare to go.

In haste, Sarah J. Foster

Diary, 1866

Thursday, March 1

I have enjoyed today very much, for the air has been mild and springlike. People are working their gardens. My school glides along smoothly too. Tonight Mary Brown came in to school to see me. Waited half an hour to talk with me afterward. We did not walk together on the street but she came after me and stopped at the shop window to call out Isaac. A lady(?) called out "Is that a 'nigger' or a white woman?" just as I passed her referring to Mary at the shop.

Friday, March 2

A springlike overcast day. I fear it will rain tomorrow. My day and evening in school were as usual pleasant. Will Fairfax has done coming for now. He must work. I gave him a nice book. He seemed glad of it. I also gave him my last Advocate letter in which I had praised him.

Tonight two white men came in to school for about twenty minutes. They were civil, but will doubtless go off and be as hard as they can.

Yesterday we made up a party for the Antietam battle-ground. We had a sky blue U.S. wagon, with a black oil-cloth cover that would roll up at the sides. That was filled and the rest of the party went on horseback. The party included Mr. and Mrs. Brackett, Mr. Given, the Misses Dudley, Wright, Gibbs and Libby, Mrs. Smith and myself, besides a Mr. Ames formerly of Massachusetts—now trading here, and a Mrs. Clemmen and her daughter also from Massachusetts, a young colored man named Keyes, invited to go as a friend and to point out localities, and our sable driver. Mr. Ames and Mr. and Mrs. Brackett rode horseback all the way, and Miss Clemmen nearly all, while Mr. Given and Mr. Keyes alternated with each other. We made a merry party, and seemed to attract a great deal of attention. We first visited the Burnside bridge near which we lunched on the grass, drinking from a cold spring that has doubtless slaked the thirst of many a wounded and dying soldier. Then we moved over to the place where the Irish Brigade fought.—Dismounting we walked about among the trees which bore many scars of shot and shell—bits of shell yet remaining in some of them. Mr. Keyes got our party some water at a house not far beyond the battle field. They inquired where we were from. He told them from New England, and that we came to visit the battle ground. They seemed to think us a long way from home, and he did not correct the impression that we came on purpose to see Antietam. The lady of the house said that eight thousand dead bodies were interred on her farm, and previously Mr. Keyes had

pointed out a large field, once filled with graves, now cultivated over. The lady spoke of it without seeming conscious of the horrible sacrilege of thus utilizing a nation's hallowed ground. We soon turned back from the plough polluted graveyard, and, coming to Bloody Lane, drove up it a little way, trying to fancy what it must have been when piled with reeking corpses, but the horror of the field beyond yet clung to us and no one alighted to search for relics. The place seemed too awful for tarrying.

Letter from Virginia

Harper's Ferry, April 20th, 1866

Dear Advocate:—it is now two weeks since I opened school here. Miss Gibbs retains the school that she has had from the first, except that a few of the poorest scholars have been put in the other department. So she has a fine school, while mine are yet in the earliest stages of reading, or else unable to read at all. The coloured people here are scattered, and many of them in very destitute circumstances. They do not now come into school so well as they did last term. The older ones are gone out at service and smaller ones, who have long distances to come, fear to do so without protection; for the white boys will molest them when they find an opportunity. The boys of both races seem rather pugilistic² about here. They have had several battles for the possession of this hill as a playground. The weapons were stones, and both parties were in earnest. My scholars at Martinsburg, though not destitute of spirit and courage, had the good sense to avoid collisions with the white boys, who often played marbles before the door. Jefferson County is much more aristocratic than Berkeley, and, as a consequence, the coloured people seem much more degraded as a class here than they are there. Here is a field for much mission labor. In Berkeley County there are more of the blacks who are competent to care for the interests of their race. But they are not dull here. Several children, who two weeks ago did not know the alphabet, are now reading in words of three letters. In the short time that we have taught out here, many, who did not know a letter, have learned to read in the Testament, and to spell well. The united testimony from all our schools is, that color is no barrier to progress.

I have four boys in my school who are so white that I should not suspect their lineage elsewhere. One has straight, light hair, and all are fine looking. Miss Gibbs has several little girls who are even whiter, or "brighter," as they call it here. One in particular, very appropriately named Lillie, has flaxen hair and grey blue eyes. One white boy comes to my school. His brother lives in the chambers here, and very wisely discards prejudice that he may have the benefit of a free school.

Last Sabbath our Sabbath school was reorganized here, some colored teachers being appointed; as Mr. Brackett wishes to get them prepared to continue the school after we go home in hot weather. Each of us takes a class. I do not know personally a member of mine, but hope to get acquainted.

Letter from Virginia

Harper's Ferry, May 2d, 1866

Dear Advocate:—When I last wrote to you I thought it possible that I might be sent to Smithfield, but now my school has come up to a list of forty, with a prospect of nearly thirty daily in fair weather. As I have thirteen in the alphabet, and all are beginners in reading, I find enough to do. I have now got the school classified and systematized, and taught to come and go by strokes of the bell. The colored children fall into systematic regulations quite well, and seem to like them too. They annoy us most of all by whispering and laughing. The little ones will forget and whisper, and all laugh easily. They improve in that however. I sometimes use their laughter as a sort of spur to dull scholars, letting them laugh at their blunders, and it works well, for they are sensitive to ridicule. We have to use all ways and means to keep up their ambition and to encourage them to study. I tried, when I first began at Martinsburg, to avoid corporeal punishment. I found it impossible, but yet, by due severity when forced to punish, I did not have it to do very often. The fact is, the colored people are practical followers of Solomon. They show very great attachment to their children, making great efforts to reclaim them if they have been sold away, but they are very severe in governing them. They expect a teacher to be so too, and the children are of the same opinion. They really like a teacher better who compels them to perfect obedience. I followed the theory at once on acquaintance, and it worked well. I grew to like some of my pupils very much, and the attachment was mutual.

I spoke of the efforts of parents to recover children who had been sold away. One woman here has exerted herself to find her four children at great expense, though dependent on her own labor altogether. She has only been able to recover two, though she has made a journey to Richmond and back to try and obtain the others, who were sold away in that vicinity. Not only has she found those two, but she has bought clothing for them, and has never drawn a ration from the Bureau, though supporting her mother also. I know two young men who have gathered together their father and mother, a sister and two infant children, and four nephews and nieces from seven to fourteen years of age. By joint efforts the family dress neatly and live entirely unaided. Where are the white men who could voluntarily burden themselves with the children of deceased relatives, while young, single, and dependent on their daily labor? I think that parallel cases among us are rare, and yet we have been asked to believe that this race are only fit for chattels, and that they felt separation as little as the brutes. A deeper, darker falsehood was never palmed upon the public. It contradicts itself at every stage of our acquaintance with them. Stronger domestic affection I never saw than some of them exhibit.

I have spoken of the variations of some familiar hymns. One occurs to me now, It is this:

Jesus my all to heaven is gone,—

He whom I've fixed my hopes upon —
 He's coming again by and by.
 Christ's coming again, Christ's coming again,
 He's coming again by and by,
 He'll come this time, and He'll come no more,
 He's coming again by and by.

And that is about the style of their peculiar hymns. They are nearly all chorus, but I like to hear them. They can all come in on the chorus after one or two repetitions, and, in a full meeting, the effect of their full melodious voices is thrilling and inspiring. As they sing they sway back and forth in time to the music, and some even step to it in a way that seems like dancing, only the whole body is in a quiver of excitement. At a meeting when a number are seeking the Savior, they will make a circle at the close around the "mourner's bench," where the seekers kneel meeting after meeting till they find peace. The circle then join hands, taking also the hands of their kneeling friends, and begin to sing, swaying as I have described, or lifting and dropping their hands in regular time. They will sing hymn after hymn with increasing earnestness, till the more excitable singers, and very likely some of the mourners, are shouting. The jumping, leaping and bodily contortions of a "shout" are beyond all description. They must be seen to be understood. For a long time I saw none of this at Martinsburg, and indeed the leading members there never practiced it, but they seem to think that converts can be brought out in no other way.

"They're going to sing over Isaac," said a colored woman to me, as I looked a little surprised to see them grouping around the bench at which one of my schoolboys was kneeling. I found that nearly all thought that the way to be "brought through." Some never yielded to it, and I am satisfied that none ever affected the emotion that convulsed those who were influenced by it. Even the white Methodists are very much the same about here; so it is not to be wondered at at all. On Saturday night we had here the most magnificent thunder shower that it was ever my lot to witness. The effect of the lightning, as the vivid chains lit up the darkness and played over the Heights, was sublime and awe-inspiring. It is quite chilly here now much of the time. We have needed a fire all day to-day. We have had some quite warm weather a day or two at a time, however, but we did not realize it much except when we descended to the village below the Hill. Here there is usually a breeze, and we can keep quite cool, I think, as long as we shall stay.

Some collisions are constantly occurring around here between the "chivalry"³ and the colored people. A sister of Mr. Keyes had an amusing triumph recently. A poor white neighbor struck her with no reasonable provocation, the fault being wholly her own. At first Mrs. Poles did not resent, but when the beating was recommenced, she retaliated in self-defense. The woman had her arrested, seeming not to know that a colored woman could have a right

to defend herself, or that she was amenable to the law for having struck first. When the case was tried before a Justice in Bolivar, she gained a little valuable experience, and had the privilege of paying the costs. The justice, I learn, referred to the Civil Rights Bill, and also intimated that the Bureau had an influence upon his decision. Well it might here, for Major Welles is an excellent and efficient officer. Only this week a colored man was knocked down for remonstrating a little because some white men had broken open his stable, taking his horse to plow with, and refusing to give it back at his request. The Justice simply made them deliver up the horse, but he designs to bring a suit for assault, to see what will be done about it. An aggravated case of assault took place in Charlestown, the particulars of which I have not yet learned. I think that some test cases will have to be brought up to prove the extent and validity of the Civil Rights Bill. The Bureau officers will probably look out for that, and may thus benefit the Freedmen a great deal.

3. chivalry: Southern Gentry.