

The South in Defeat, 1865

On April 9, 1865, Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered his army to Union General Ulysses Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia (see Surrender at Appomattox, 1865). By the end of the month the remaining Confederate armies had followed suit. After four blood-letting years, the War Between the States was over.

Union troops quickly moved to occupy the former Confederate States and install military rule until civilian governments could be organized for the states. The first step on the pathway to re-integration with the Union for the former Confederacy was for its citizens to take an oath of allegiance to the Union and to pledge to abide by President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation freeing the slaves. A former Confederate State would be eligible for re-integration once ten percent of its population had made this pledge.



Charleston, South Carolina, 1865

"God in His good providence has not seen fit to grant us our prayer and hearts desires."

Henry William Revenal was a plantation owner living near Aiken, South Carolina. He left us a diary of his day-to-day activities that provides insight into conditions in the South at the close of the war. We join his story as Yankee occupation of South Carolina is well under way:

May 9

Rode into Aiken this morning. Bought 23 lbs soft soap at 10 cts per lb to be paid in specie or provisions. Confederate notes are now universally refused except on the Railroad to Augusta. This morning I had not a cent but we sent out a few vegetables which sold for 85 cts, and this is the whole fortune I own in money.

We are beginning life again in our financial affairs. Many Negroes in Aiken hearing they were free in Augusta have gone over to hear from the Yankees the truth. Some are returning disappointed [sic]....

Most that we hear is mere rumor. The press is now muzzled - and all news comes to us through the sieve of Yankee eyes. We are bound hand and foot . . . we can now see the naked truth that our great struggle for independence and the right of self government is lost. I need not enumerate here the reasons by which we justified our efforts at independence.

God in His good providence has not seen fit to grant us our prayer and hearts desires. If it is his will that we are not to be a nation, but only a part of the United States again, so be it. I acquiesce in this decision and accept it as His act.

May 12

Yesterday I went over to Augusta to purchase a few supplies. Specie and green backs (U.S. currency) is the only money now available... Yankee force stationed in the town and I saw a number of the soldiers strolling about the streets, chatting and laughing with our men. They seem to feel quite at home A large number of idle Negroes are about the streets coming in from the country and leaving their masters. The Military authorities decline to interfere in any way. They do not tell the Negroes they are free, but refuse to return them to their owners. They say they have received no instructions upon the subject. If this state of things continue it is virtually emancipating them, as there is no power or authority in the civil powers to act, whilst the city is under military rule...

May 25

We still remain in doubt as to the emancipation policy. No official announcement except President Lincoln's amnesty proclamation has been published... The party in power now are radical abolitionists and will do all in their power to urge it forward. Both policy and humanity would dictate that it should be gradual, so that both parties at the South

may accommodate themselves to so radical a change in social and political economy... My Negroes have made no change in their behavior, and are going on as they have always hitherto done. Until I know that they are legally free, I shall let them continue. If they become free by law then the whole system must be changed. If the means which I now possess of supporting the old and the young are taken away, they must then necessarily look for their support to their own exertions. How they can support themselves at present, I cannot see... If Emancipation prevails, the negro must become a laborer in the field, as the whites will soon occupy all the domestic and mechanic employments...

May 29

I went in to Aiken this morning and called at the hotel to inquire if any officer in Aiken was authorized to administer the Oath of Allegiance. They expected in a day or two to have it done here. It is necessary now in order to save property, have personal protection, or exercise, the rights of citizenship, or any business calling. Everyone who is allowed, is now taking the oath, as the Confederate govt. is annulled, the state govt. destroyed, and the return into the Union absolutely necessary to our condition as an organized community.

As Gen. Gillmore's order, based upon Chief Justice Chase's opinion, announces the freedom of the Negroes there is no further room to doubt that it is the settled policy of the country. I have today formally announced to my Negroes the fact, and made such arrangements with each as the new relation rendered necessary. Those whose whole time we need, get at present clothes and food, house rent and medical attendance. The others work for themselves giving me a portion of their time on the farm in lieu of house rent. Old Amelia and her two grandchildren, I will spare the mockery of offering freedom to. I must support them as long as I have anything to give.

May 30

My Negroes all express a desire to remain with me. I am gratified at the proof of their attachment. I believe it to be real and unfeigned.

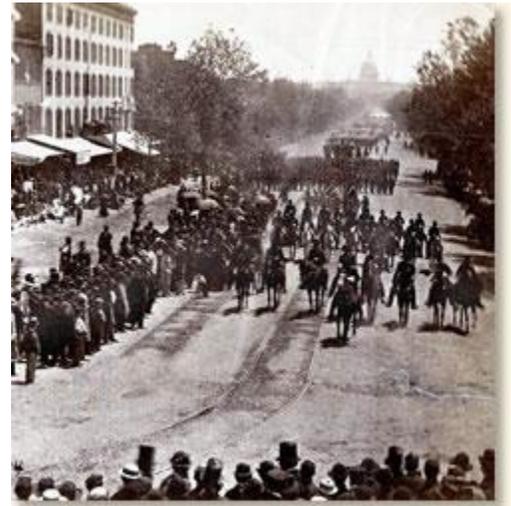
For the present they will remain, but in course of time we must part, as I cannot afford to keep so many, and they cannot afford to hire for what I could give them. As they have always been faithful and attached to us, and have been raised as family servants, and have all of them been in our family for several generations, there is a feeling towards them somewhat like that of a father who is about to send out his children on the world to make their way through life.

Those who have brought the present change of relation upon us are ignorant of these ties. They have charged us with cruelty. They call us, man stealers, robbers, tyrants. The indignant denial of these charges and the ill feelings engendered during 30 years of angry controversy, have culminated at length in the four years war which has now ended. It has pleased God that we should fail in our efforts for independence and with the loss of independence, we return to the Union under the dominion of the abolition sentiment.

The experiment is now to be tried. The Negro is not only to be emancipated, but is to become a citizen with all the right and privileges! It produces a financial, political and social revolution at the South, fearful to contemplate in its ultimate effects. Whatever the result may be, let it be known and remembered that neither the Negro slave nor his master is responsible. It has been done by those who having political power, are determined to carry into practice the sentimental philanthropy they have so long and angrily advocated. Now that is fixed. I pray God for the great issues at stake, that he may bless the effort and make it successful - make it a blessing and not a curse to the poor Negro."

References:

This eyewitness account appears in: Arney, Robinson Charles, ed. The Private Journal of Henry William Revenal, 1859-1887 (1947). <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/pfsouthindefeat.htm>



The *Grand Review* celebrating the close of the Civil War, marches down Pennsylvania Avenue. Washington, DC
May 23, 1865