

The Freedmen's Bureau School in Lexington versus "General Lee's Boys"

JOHN M. MCCLURE

In November 1865 the American Missionary Association sent William L. Coan to western Virginia to organize new schools for African Americans. Coan left Richmond with his sights set on the small college town of Lexington in the Shenandoah Valley. Freedmen's Bureau agents warned Coan that "General Lee's boys" in Lexington would make it "a *hard* place for 'Nigger' Teachers." Before Coan reached the Valley, during a rest stop at a train station in Gordonsville, he was assaulted after confirming that he was a "meddling Yankee" en route to establish a freedmen's school. The man hit Coan several times in the head, while a small crowd of about twenty people stood by. Coan wrote later that the "Southern Gentlemen' enjoy[ed] hugely seeing the damned . . . Yankee thus handled." The beating at Gordonsville failed, however, to stop Coan from continuing on to Lexington. Indeed, his resolve was strengthened. He looked forward to helping "God open up the fields, and prepare the soil to receive the seed" of freedmen's education. Coan opened the school in Lexington on December 12, 1865.¹

Freedmen's Bureau commissioner Oliver Otis Howard pinned many of his hopes for the betterment of the freedpeople on their access to education, but the agency initially had little explicit authority and virtually no capital to engage in educational efforts. Northern missionary groups, which had taken up the cause of educating black Southerners while the Civil War was still being waged, provided the practical means for Howard's goals. Many of the groups that worked closely with the Freedmen's Bureau had originated in the abolitionist

movement and consisted of evangelical Christian missionaries. Later, when Congress wrested Reconstruction policy away from President Andrew Johnson, Freedmen's Bureau coffers greatly expanded, enabling the agency to facilitate the construction and repair of schools and to supplement teachers' salaries.²

In Virginia the American Missionary Association (AMA) was the most active Northern aid society and worked closely with the Freedmen's Bureau. The AMA's wartime experience in eastern Virginia positioned the group to dominate postwar aid efforts in the state. Originally from Chelsea, Massachusetts, William Coan was a veteran of the abolitionist movement. He traveled in 1864 to Hampton, where he became an AMA school organizer and superintendent. Orlando Brown, who headed Virginia's Freedmen's Bureau for most of its existence, had become familiar with AMA officials and operations while serving in the Bureau of Negro Affairs in the tidewater area late in the war.³ The two men's experience and familiarity with each other naturally expanded the linkage between the AMA and the Virginia Freedmen's Bureau. The cohesion between the two organizations in Virginia mirrored the relationship at the national level between O. O. Howard and top AMA officials.⁴

As Coan journeyed through the "Wicked Valley" in the fall of 1865, he corresponded regularly with Brown to update him on his progress. Lexington became an important goal for Coan, because he heard many boasts about Washington College, Virginia Military Institute, and the renewed vigor Gen. Robert E. Lee would lend to those institutions as the recently installed president of Washington College. Freedmen's Bureau agents throughout the Shenandoah warned Coan that whites would watch the freedmen's school closely, hoping for its failure. After Coan's arrival in Lexington, he described the town and its "defiant Rebels" as a "nest of Vipers, . . . the vilest of vile sinks of pollution."⁵

Lexington's blacks, by contrast, immediately embraced the school. Months before Coan's arrival, they had pooled their money to rent a room in anticipation of a school, and they had asked the local Freedmen's Bureau agent many times when a teacher would arrive. When Coan first met with many of the town's African Americans at their church on December 11, his announcement provoked "shouts of joy

and many Hallelujahs." Within a week of the school's opening, more than three hundred students—ranging in age from very small children to grandparents in their sixties—nearly overwhelmed Coan and the one female teacher accompanying him. The classes soon became so large that the teachers began using the basement of their rented house to meet the demand. Night schools, because they permitted the students to keep their daytime jobs, especially flourished. The school progressed rapidly; the teachers were impressed with how quickly their scholars learned. Coan reported proudly to his superiors that "the Ice is *broken*, and . . . these *infernal Rebels* have [black schools] among them, and in their very midst."⁶

Whites, outraged that a school for blacks had opened in their town, vented their anger in myriad ways. Whites taunted black children as they walked to school; white employers warned their black workers "I don't need educated niggers." Some local merchants began to charge blacks higher prices than their white customers. The Northern teachers who arrived in Lexington met similar hostility. No one would rent lodgings to the missionaries except the Unionist Mrs. Archibald, and she soon left town to join her husband in the North, because she could no longer stand being treated like "a leper." The teachers met with epithets and silent glares on the town's streets; storeowners often refused to do business with them.

In addition to the townspeople, the students and cadets of local Washington College and the Virginia Military Institute added a strong element of young, white males who were proudly unreconstructed. Many of the students and cadets were veterans of the Confederate army, and many came from elite families. They responded to the freedmen's school by threatening to tar and feather William Coan and burn down the school building. Other warnings included the blunt promise that "'Nigger schools' shall not go on." The college students frequently threw stones at the school's windows and loudly sang "rebel songs" during impromptu evening "parades." Many of the young men boarded near the AMA mission house and encountered the teachers frequently on the street. Teachers were called "Yankee bitches" so often that the insult "hardly impress[ed]" them after the first few months. The female teachers contended that the physical encounters were more offensive. Men often stood in the women's path as

they walked home from school in the evening, forcing the teachers to push past them. On several occasions the students jostled the women and made "vulgar suggestions"; the teachers reported smelling whiskey on the men's breath.⁷

Teachers' complaints about the college students provoked action by the local Freedmen's Bureau agents. Especially during the first year of freedmen's schools in Lexington, when the Freedmen's Bureau could offer little material aid to the missionaries, the agents provided a critical protective buffer between the teachers and hostile whites. Agent Lieutenant Tubbs sent written warnings to Lee and to Francis H. Smith, superintendent of Virginia Military Institute, in late January respectfully advising the leaders to curb their students' "rambunctious" behavior toward the "fine ladies" of the AMA school.⁸ Tubbs warned a Washington College professor that continued harassment of the teachers could result in black troops being garrisoned in Lexington—a possibility that "horrified" the professor.⁹ Agent Carse issued a public warning to the town. In April 1866, for the first time in Rockbridge County, a local magistrate considered a controversial case of assault and battery brought by a black man against three VMI cadets. The freedman had been on his way home from a night school session when he was attacked. The court ordered the cadets only to keep the peace; the magistrate decided that since the freedman "had given as good as he got" and had not been injured, the cadets had perhaps learned their lesson. The landmark case drew an overflow crowd to the courthouse, including a majority of the cadets of VMI and the students of Washington College. Carse took advantage of the opportunity to warn the students "unless they acted differently, the Government would [probably] close the college and Institute."¹⁰

The AMA teachers faced organizational hurdles in addition to a hostile environment. The teachers wrote to their superiors requesting supplies to be sent from New York in order to avoid inflated Virginia prices and surly white merchants in Lexington. The teachers soon expanded their idea of importing Northern goods. Julia Anne Shearman proposed to her AMA superiors in January 1866 the establishment of a store to cater to Lexington's black community; the enterprise would save the AMA money and would enable black residents and the teachers alike to largely avoid white storeowners. The Freedmen's Bureau

agreed to provide free transportation of goods within Virginia, adding to the thriftiness of the plan. By the end of February, AMA teacher Erastus Johnston had rented a room for the business, hired an "intelligent black man who can read and write" to help run the store, and begun to stock goods. In addition to competing economically with white storeowners by reducing their monopoly on black customers, Johnston challenged Lexington's racial order by placing an African American man in a managerial position. Whites denounced the new store, and Johnston became a pariah to the white community.¹¹

Despite financial support from the Freedmen's Bureau and continuing patronage from Northern missionaries, black contributions remained critical to the success of black schools in the region. Lexington's African Americans shrewdly prepared for emancipation's opportunities before the end of the war. They paid off the mortgage on their church building with Confederate currency in late 1864, because they knew that Union victory would render their dollars worthless. Yet they worried that Lexington bankers would dispute the balance remaining on the mortgage in the chaotic aftermath of war. In January 1866 local blacks established the "Freedman's School Society." The group collected donations to help pay "the expenses of the school rooms, rent, wood, [and] lights" and proposed to buy books for students who could not afford them.¹² African American financial support in the Lexington area grew throughout the Reconstruction period, and soon blacks ran schools themselves. Baptist reverend Milton Smith established the private "Lexington School" in December 1869. Blacks paid for the school wholly; they received no support from aid societies or the Freedmen's Bureau.¹³ In rural areas outside of Lexington, African Americans initiated two schools in Rockbridge County in 1867, one in Brownsburg and the other at Natural Bridge.¹⁴

The AMA school in Lexington continued to enjoy a strong enrollment and the steady progress of its students. But the school remained at the center of combustible black-white relations—particularly when statewide political battles elevated local racial tensions. In March 1867, just after Virginia became officially known as "Military District Number One" in accordance with Congress's Reconstruction Acts, five white college students went to the schoolhouse likely planning to disrupt Republican speeches to the black audience. As they peered into

the windows, a freedman told them to leave. One of the students proceeded to beat the freedman with his pistol, but caused only minor injuries. The perpetrator managed to escape after the brief altercation, but his four companions were arrested. News of the fight and arrests reached the Washington College campus quickly, prompting a large mob of students to march toward the center of town, planning to “rescue” their friends from jail. Givens Strickler, a college student and former Confederate captain, successfully appealed to the students to restrain themselves, invoking General Lee’s name to implore the men not to storm the jail. Strickler’s arguments convinced the mob to disperse. Lee expelled the student who committed the pistol whipping when he later admitted the deed in Lee’s office. Bureau agent Captain Sharp told his superiors that, although a “major collision” was “narrowly avoided,” the situation remained “highly volatile.”¹⁵

Tensions were again high in early 1868 as the state constitutional convention meeting in Richmond vigorously debated the scope of political rights for black Virginians. Erastus Johnston was no longer teaching school in Lexington, but he continued to operate his store and organized the local “loyal league” in support of the Republican Party.¹⁶ Such activities made him, as Douglas Southall Freeman described in an elegant understatement, “somewhat notorious and distinctly unpopular” among Lexington’s whites. Agent Sharp reported bluntly that Johnston was “very obnoxious to the white citizens of the county with exactly no exception. They openly despise him and are incendiary.” Conversely, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Johnston enjoyed “great popularity among the Freedpeople.”¹⁷

On February 4, 1868, Johnston went skating at a popular spot on the North River just outside of Lexington. He met with the usual mix of glares and catcalls from the other skaters until a young white male (as young as twelve or as old as seventeen, according to various reports) approached Johnston and called him a “son of a bitch.” Johnston drew his pistol; he later claimed he felt threatened by both the taunt and the crowd who were now closing in on him. White witnesses claimed that Johnston aimed the pistol at the boy and threatened his life. The crowd, with many college students among them, quickly became an outright mob, throwing rocks and chunks of ice at Johnston. Cries of “Hang him!” echoed after Johnston as he ran away from the

river and returned to town. That night, after Johnston reported the incident to local authorities, a crowd gathered in front of his store. They loudly threatened his life and attempted to break into the building, but they dispersed without violence. Local white officials immediately downplayed the incident, but Freedmen's Bureau agent Douglas Frazar was concerned enough to call for troops from Major Willcox in Lynchburg. The incident brought national attention to Lexington when Johnston wrote to the New York newspaper *The Independent* about his experience, and AMA teacher Julia Shearman wrote to the same journal to discuss the "Rebel sentiments" of Lexington whites. Johnston, perhaps prudently, decided within a few days of the incident to move out of town.¹⁸ Thus, through intimidation and violence, Lexington whites succeeded in removing the influential activist from their midst.

While these public acts of violence punctuated Lexington's Reconstruction experience, more private forms of violence also permeated the atmosphere. These interior battles pitted white men against black females. Some Washington College students and VMI cadets sexually abused black girls and young women, many of them students at the freedmen's school. The social stigmatization associated with sexual violence in the mid-nineteenth century ensured that these incidents were not always dealt with in an open manner, but there is strong evidence that some white men acted as sexual predators in Lexington. Bureau agent Captain Sharp reported that, on several occasions, college students attempted "to abduct . . . unwilling colored girls [for] readily divined purposes."¹⁹

In June 1866 a VMI cadet attacked a young black woman working as a chambermaid in the Lexington Hotel. The woman entered the man's room expecting him to be absent; he instead surprised her and attempted to rape her. The hotel's owner heard her screams and interrupted the attack before the cadet "ravished" her, but she was left "much bruised." Bureau agent Carse reported that he urged the woman's father to have the local magistrate issue a warrant for the man's arrest. But after ominous warnings from several students not to pursue the case, the family let the matter drop.²⁰ The family's reluctance to bring charges is perhaps explained by an incident in 1868. On that occasion a VMI cadet accused of raping a black woman avoided

trial when Mayor Ruff “allowed and assisted” his escape from the military authorities investigating the crime.²¹

Other sexual encounters between the white college students and young black females were more complex. AMA teachers reported in the spring of 1866 that they expelled a “young colored girl” because she was pregnant; the girl implied that the father was a white student. The teachers believed that the unmarried girl’s presence would be “a poor moral example” for the smaller children in the day school. Rather than slip away in shame, however, the expelled student angrily objected to the teachers’ decision. The girl claimed that she—like many girls in the school, she said—was guilty only of “regular cohabitation with one white man, of which neither he nor she was ashamed.” The girl’s defense suggests that some college students engaged in relationships with black females that approximated prostitution. Johnston, at this time still a teacher at the school, confirmed that the student “supported” the girl, presumably in return for sex, and that such an arrangement was “sadly common.”

Although some of these encounters may not have constituted rape in a legal sense, the inherent disparity in gender and race relationships in postwar Lexington, combined with the lingering effects of slavery-era sexual subordination of black women, guaranteed that such sexual relations were intrinsically coercive. Teacher Sarah Burt wrote that girls felt “helpless” when pursued by white men, and that many were simply forced to “succumb to the brutal desires” of the college students. Indeed, Johnston claimed “the chief amusement of many of the Students and [cadets] is to seduce young, colored girls” and that “there is scarcely a virtuous girl here over 16 years of age.” The threat of violence was omnipresent in such encounters: black women and girls undoubtedly knew they risked being assaulted if they denied their aggressors’ demands. Moreover, white men apparently faced little chance of prosecution for rape. Bureau agents usually mentioned such incidents in passing with little elaboration and generally did not follow through with investigations or arrests. Local white authorities either ignored the crimes or followed Mayor Ruff’s example and abetted the men’s escape from prosecution. Sexual violence constituted one of the more tragic aspects of Reconstruction in Lexington.

Throughout 1867 and 1868, relations between Lexington’s blacks

and whites grew ever more tense. In July 1868 a group of African Americans traveled from Lexington to Collierstown, a small village ten miles away, to make political speeches to black residents there about the elections that, it was expected, would soon be taking place. The speakers were "surrounded and chased" by a large group of white men. As Freedmen's Bureau agent Frazar reported, "so many men were hiding in the bushes and riding on the roads after dark that the Freedmen abandoned their [wagon] and took to the woods for safety." The mob searched for the black speakers as they fled back to Lexington—but failed to find them. Among the white men were several prominent Lexington residents, including W. W. Scott and future Virginia governor Charles T. O'Ferrall. According to Frazar's report, several blacks spotted O'Ferrall in the mob; he had recently taken over the Lexington Hotel, and he entered Washington College to study law in the fall of 1868. Scott vented his frustration by locking up the Lexington freedmen's school building with his own key. The school was soon reopened, but the incident shows that Lexington's whites understood the importance of the school to the black community. When unable to physically punish African Americans for asserting their political rights, whites attacked a symbol of blacks' nascent freedom—their school.²²

In antebellum Virginia, a state law had outlawed schools for black residents. When the proscription ended with Union victory in the Civil War, freedpeople enthusiastically flocked to newly founded schools. Education was a practical goal, but it meant much more to Southern blacks than learning to read and write. Freedpeople's schools embodied one of the fundamental elements of emancipation: by attending school, freedpeople rejected the mental imprisonment attempted by their former owners. Moreover, black schools came to represent African Americans' agency and assertiveness. The Lexington school building became a focal point for the black community, where students of all ages received instruction, political meetings took place, and social events provided entertainment.

As a symbol of black independence, however, the school became a target for Lexington whites' angry—and sometimes violent—response to a new postwar reality. The last Freedmen's Bureau agent in Lexington, John W. Jordan, lamented the deteriorating state of race relations there in 1868. Jordan recognized "the deeply seated hatred

cherished toward the [black] race by these [students and cadets] and the *quiet* encouragement and support given it by the citizens residing here."²³ Moreover, the students received ambiguous signals from their beloved General Lee. Lee expelled violent students for personal and pragmatic reasons, and he genuinely cautioned them against "lawlessness." Yet he testified before the Joint Committee on Reconstruction that Virginia would be improved by the removal of its black population. While the general cultivated a conciliatory posture in the Northern press, he wrote to friends, family, and former comrades that the Confederate cause was just. Indeed, despite the contentions of Lee's hagiographers, the general remained an unreconstructed Southern nationalist after the war—and his opinions were widely circulated in the South.²⁴ Lee publicly denounced the intimidation of blacks and missionaries that occurred in Lexington, but his "boys" were almost certainly aware of his political views. And, despite Lee's protests, the students continued to deliver an emphatic message to the black community rejecting their civil and political rights.

Notes

1. W. L. Coan to Rev. George Whipple, 12, 25 December 1865, Virginia Field Records, American Missionary Association Archives, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana. The author consulted a microfilmed copy of the Virginia records of the AMA at the Library of Virginia in Richmond. Hereafter, these records will be referred to as "AMAA-VA" with writer, recipient, and date of the letter or report noted.
2. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York, 1988), 144-46.
3. Joe Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890* (Athens, Ga., 1986), 3-5, 12, 95-96, 204-5.
4. The AMA and Freedmen's Bureau had many ties; both organizations were closely linked to the Congregational Church. Howard's superintendent of schools, John W. Alvord, was a Congregational minister. Rev. George Whipple, the corresponding secretary of the AMA, formed a close friendship with Howard, often advising him on a wide range of topics. See Ronald E. Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875* (Westport, Conn., 1980), 102-3; Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 76-77; and Robert C. Morris, *Reading, 'Riting, and Reconstruction: The Education of Freedmen in the South, 1861-1870* (Chicago, 1976), 48.
5. W. L. Coan to Rev. George Whipple, 12 December 1865, AMAA-VA.

6. Ibid.; E. C. Johnston, Teacher's Monthly Report for Jan. 1866, AMAA-VA.
7. W. L. Coan to Rev. George Whipple, 12 December 1865; E. C. Johnston to Rev. Samuel Hunt, 28 February 1866; J. A. Shearman to Rev. Samuel Hunt, 5 February, 31 March 1866, AMAA-VA; Michael Fellman, *The Making of Robert E. Lee* (New York, 2000), 250-51.
8. Lieutenant Tubbs to R. E. Lee, 27 January 1866, and to F. H. Smith, 27 January 1866, Letters Sent and Orders Issued, Lexington Office of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105, Entry 4044, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter, records from the Lexington Bureau office held in the National Archives will be referred to with appropriate designation of the type of record, followed by "Lexington Office, BRFal, RG 105, Entry Number, NA.")
9. W. L. Coan to Rev. George Whipple, 12 December 1865, AMAA-VA.
10. Brevet Major Carse to Captain How, 1 May 1866, Reports of Operations and Conditions: Monthly Narrative Reports, January 1866-December 1868, Virginia records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105, National Archives Microfilm Publication 1048, roll 44, frames 692-93. (Hereafter, records of the Lexington Bureau office microfilmed by the staff of the National Archives will be referred to as "BRFal-VA, RG 105, M-1048" followed by roll and frame number.)
11. W. L. Coan to Rev. Samuel Hunt, 9 December 1865; J. A. Shearman to William E. Whiting, 20 January 1866, E. C. Johnston to Rev. Samuel Hunt, 27 January, 28 February 1866, AMAA-VA.
12. W. L. Coan to Rev. George Whipple and Michael E. Strieby, 12 December 1865; E. C. Johnston to Rev. Samuel Hunt, 27 January 1866.
13. Teachers' Monthly School Reports, December 1869-January 1870, Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Virginia, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-70, National Archives Microfilm Publication 1053, roll 14, frames 143-44, roll 18, frame 370. (Hereafter, Virginia Bureau education records microfilmed by the staff of the National Archives will be referred to as "BRFal-VA-ED, RG 105, M-1053" followed by roll and frame number.)
14. Captain Sharp to Gen. O. Brown, 31 May 1867, Unregistered Letters, April 1867-July 1868, BRFal-VA-ED, M1053, roll 7, frame 177.
15. Captain Sharp to Captain Lacey, Monthly Narrative Report, 31 March 1867, BRFal-VA, RG 105, M-1048, roll 44, frames 317-19, Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee: A Biography* (New York, 1934-35), 4:316-17; Charles Bracelen Flood, *Lee: The Last Years* (Boston, 1981), 150-51.
16. E. C. Johnston wrote to Rev. Samuel Hunt on several occasions that a viable Republican Party was "absolutely necessary" for Virginia's blacks to gain political agency; he reportedly discussed politics with Lexington blacks many times. Additionally, Captain Sharp nominated Johnston as an electoral registering agent in 1867 upon Johnston's return from meetings in Richmond with

- Republican officials, after being selected by Lexington blacks as their representative. See Johnston to Hunt, 30 April 1866, AMAA-VA; Captain Sharp to Captain Lacey, 29 May 1867, Press Copies, Lexington Office, BRFAL, RG 105, Entry 4046, NA; and the *Lexington Gazette and Banner*, 17 April 1867, 3.
17. Freeman, *Lee*, 4:346; Captain Sharp to Captain Lacey, 29 May 1867, Press Copies, Lexington Office, BRFAL, RG 105, Entry 4046, NA.
 18. Douglas Frazar to Captain Lacey, Monthly Narrative Report, 29 February 1868, BRFAL-VA, RG 105, M-1048, roll 48, frames 746-47; Major Willcox to Douglas Frazar, 27 February 1868, Letters Received, Lexington Office, BRFAL, RG 105, Entry 4048, NA; Freeman, *Lee*, 4:345-48; and Flood, *Lee*, 176-78.
 19. Captain Sharp to Captain Lacey, 28 February 1867, Monthly Narrative Report, BRFAL-VA, RG 105, M-1048, roll 48, frame 46.
 20. Brevet Major Carse to Bvt. Maj. J. H. Remington, 14 June 1866, and endorsement by Inspector Neide, 26 June 1866, Letters Received, Lexington Office, BRFAL, RG 105, Entry 4048, NA.
 21. Douglas Frazar to Captain Lacey, 31 August 1868, Monthly Narrative Report, BRFAL-VA, RG 105, M-1048, roll 49, Frame 588.
 22. Douglas Frazar to Captain Lacey, 31 July 1868, *ibid.*, frames 496-498; *Lexington Gazette and Banner*, 25 March 1868, 3; Minor T. Weisiger, "Charles T. O'Ferrall: 'Gray Eagle' from the Valley," in *The Governors of Virginia, 1860-1978*, eds. Edward Younger and James Tice Moore (Charlottesville, Va., 1982), 135-37. Elections to choose the governor, lieutenant governor, and attorney general were anticipated in Virginia in 1868, as well as a referendum on the state constitution written by the Underwood Convention, but Congress failed to authorize the contests until July 1869. See Richard Lowe, *Republicans and Reconstruction in Virginia, 1856-70* (Charlottesville, Va., 1991), 148-55, 172.
 23. John W. Jordan to Captain Lacey, 31 October 1868, Monthly Narrative Report, BRFAL-VA, RG 105, M-1048, roll 49, frame 901.
 24. The most cogent discussion of Lee's complex postwar mind-set is found in Fellman, *Making of Robert E. Lee*, 249-94; see also Alan T. Nolan, *Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991), 134-52.