

NATHANIEL RICHARDSON, A WITNESS TO FREED SLAVES IN 1865

By Ellen Knight¹

Following the Civil War, Winchester native Col. Nathaniel A. Richardson (1820-1908) was in the South, serving as Commissary of Subsistence for the U. S. Army. This put him in a position to travel and to observe post-war conditions that inspired very frank, no-holds-barred articles on the state of whites and blacks during the year following the cessation of the war.

His writings² condemned not only the former practice of slavery but also the prevalent attitudes and conditions of the people who had lost their “unpaid labor.” In contrast, he saw what the whites were lacking exemplified in the former slaves.

IN NEW ORLEANS

In November, 1865, Richardson wrote from New Orleans, “It was not enough that States should exist, based on unpaid human bondage, not enough to rend virtue, break blood-ties, and transact social enormities deep and damning enough to call heaven to revenge, but the bodily-lustful, morally-rotten, and politically-heartless upholders of these States must spread more tears and anguish over a whole continent, to blot out freedom and plant slavery; and now, when defeated and routed, demand to be forgiven and restored, covered, as it were, with original sin.

“Let me say a word about the poor blacks, the loyal blacks, without whose aid victory and peace would never have come. The South began the war to continue the enslavement of the dark image of the Creator. No labor was lost, no toll unknown that selfish men and bitter women could invent to throttle the Union, substitute war for peace, or hate for love. In this conflict, the blacks arrayed themselves with the North – were ever true and loyal against the false and disloyal.”

Richardson was aghast at the idea that Southern whites, after “all the horrors of this murderous war,” should be returned to favor and office. He himself argued for the rights of the blacks. “We have made the black man a citizen of the republic, given him the obligations and responsibilities of a freeman, now award him a voice in all that concerns his welfare.”



Nathaniel A. Richardson's portrait by Winchester's Edward A. Brackett. Courtesy of the Winchester Historical Society

He argued specifically for suffrage. "The war has ended with their freedom from servitude. But the victory is incomplete till all the rights of freedom are secured, the right to vote, the right to hold office in common with *equally* moral and intelligent whites. The blacks have reached the goal, shall they not have the reward?"

He found whites to be bitter and hostile. He complained that things they said about blacks, particularly that they were lazy and could not take care of themselves, were just not true. "All over the South, they are studying the leaf of a primer or a scrap of paper.... They are ambitious to learn."

A month later, in Vicksburg, he wrote, "All the work done here is performed by the blacks who are the life and vigor of this place." He found that it was the whites, made indolent by being waited on by unpaid labor, who could not take care of themselves. He went on at length about the vile cooking and cleaning by white women who complained that the "lazy n—s had run off." In Richardson's opinion, "In truth, the redeeming cleanliness of the South is manifested by the blacks."

Richardson appears to have been repeatedly appalled at attitudes in the South, not only toward blacks but also toward the North. "The daughters [of a "fashionable white family in Virginia"] were open in denouncing the dirty factory girls of the North and thought it 'perfectly horrible' that they should have ever edited a literary magazine."

Richardson returned to the issue of suffrage and recorded a remarkable story of Southern voting in a county near Richmond. "Three commissioners of election presided. One had a list of the candidates to be voted for on a sheet of paper before him, another took the name of the voter, and the third asked him for whom he wished to vote. The voter must name his man, or his vote would not be received. When the voter called his man, the first commissioner wrote it down. And this was democratic, free elections in Virginia!" He witnessed one candidate who was short of votes bribe a voter with seventy-five cents.

Back on the subject of slavery he wrote that slavery had engendered complete corruption, with wealth, morality, and much political power having been based upon the practice. "Yet her sons and daughters would willingly longer worship this enfeebling and infamous pollution!"

IN BATON ROUGE

Richardson wrote again from Baton Rouge after a boat ride down the Mississippi. "Most of the South is a splendid country," he wrote, referring to its natural resources and products. From there he went on to extoll the benefits of paid labor. "If paid and respected, his interest, as well as his employer's will be fostered by him."

However, he was finding that "to verify his charge of laziness and ignorance, he [the master] will give him [the black] no help or encouragement, but abuse and crush him. It is mortifying to the white Southerner to see his slaves free; he would rather see them destroyed and cast down."

Unfortunately, Richardson observed that “the master has made no effort to improve his own conditions. Slavery has demoralized and stultified him.”

Richardson had great faith in the future for blacks, if protected by the government and granted education and opportunities. “Two hundred years of abuse, want, and cruelty has kept him down; twenty-five years of care and education will fit him for a higher place than half of his defamers now occupy.”

“Your readers can have no idea what strong efforts the blacks are making to support themselves. All they ask is a show for life and work.”

Richardson himself gave the opportunity for a new life away from people who resented black freedom to a former slave who had been his orderly during and after the war. When Richardson came home in 1866, Stephen Roberts came with him and stayed in Winchester not only through Richardson’s death in 1908 but also his own in 1924. It was then written that Roberts “was universally respected and beloved,” a stark contrast to the attitudes towards former slaves that Richardson recorded about a half century earlier in the South.

The articles Richardson wrote during and following the war have been preserved as clippings in a scrapbook in the Winchester Archival Center. It is currently unknown in which newspapers they were published. It was not Winchester, since this town did not have a newspaper of its own until two decades after his return home.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Feb. 19, 2015. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Quotations in this article are drawn from a scrapbook of Richardson’s published newspaper articles in the Winchester Archival Center. Most articles are clipped so that the name of the papers are missing. Some quotations come from a series, “The South as It Is: An Interior View by a Middlesex Soldier.” The three parts were written in New Orleans, November 1866, Vicksburg Dec. 1, 1865, and Baton Rouge, Dec., 1865.