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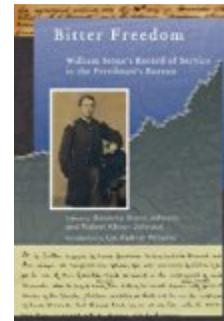
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Suzanne Stone Johnson, Robert Johnson. *Bitter Freedom: William Stone's Record of Service in the Freedmen's Bureau*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008. Plates. xxxii + 117 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-766-5.

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Published on H-CivWar (February, 2009)

Commissioned by Matthew E. Mason



William Stone's Reconstruction: A Personal Recollection of Service with the Freedmen's Bureau in South Carolina

Over the past decade, historians of the Reconstruction era have enjoyed ever increasing access to materials produced by the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands. Records of the state and national offices of the Freedmen's Bureau, as the agency is commonly known, have been available for some time on microfilm. However, the National Archives, the repository of the bureau's manuscript records, recently completed producing nearly one thousand additional rolls of microfilm containing the records of the local agencies that dealt with the grassroots issues of Reconstruction. Once only available as manuscript in the National Archives building in Washington DC, these materials are now stored and ready for use in regional federal archives across the country.[1]

These official Freedmen's Bureau records provide one of the richest sources for studying the African American experience in the postwar South. They also are an extraordinary window into the lives of civilians and soldiers who braved harsh circumstances to try to implement federal Reconstruction policy. However, there remains a paucity of personal documents that could add unique perspectives to the official record. There are a few manuscript collections scattered across the country produced by bureau men, such as Massachusetts native Erastus Everson's papers at the South Carolina Historical Society in Charleston or Maine native John Emory Bryant's papers at Duke University in Durham, North

Carolina. Oliver Otis Howard, the only commissioner of the bureau, discussed in detail his involvement with the agency in his two-volume autobiography, *Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard* (1908). John William De Forest wrote a lively account of his work with the South Carolina Bureau, published as *A Union Officer in the Reconstruction*, edited by James H. Croushore and David Morris Potter in 1948. But memoirs and personal manuscript collections such as these are rare finds. Consequently, editors Suzanne Stone Johnson and Robert Allison Johnson have done a great service by bringing to light William Stone's brief but important personal report of his activities with the bureau in South Carolina. Long preserved by Stone's descendents, the family has made available a document worthy of the attention of all readers interested in this era.

Historian Lou Falkner Williams, who contributed a fine introduction to this volume, points out that Stone's report is "neither an official government record nor a diary;" rather, it is a "personal summary of all that he saw and accomplished as a Freedmen's Bureau agent" (p. xii). Written in late 1868 at the end of Stone's bureau service, the report is a precise, honest record of its author's commitment to the best goals of Reconstruction. Stone, who went on to become a lawyer, might have lacked the literary pretensions of De Forest. Nevertheless, he was a keen observer who had a way with words that makes his report entertaining as well as enlightening. Stone's report

is arguably at least as valuable as De Forest's account in revealing what bureau men thought of their duties while they performed them.

Williams, an associate professor of history at Kansas State University and the author of an important study of South Carolina Reconstruction (*The Great South Carolina Ku Klux Klan Trials, 1871-1872* [1996]), provides ample context for Stone's informal report. Indeed, Williams's biographical sketch of Stone—a Maine-born, Massachusetts-bred son of an abolitionist preacher who campaigned for Abraham Lincoln in 1860—proves just how extraordinary a man he was. Stone served in the federal army from the outset of the war, participated in several major engagements, and endured several wounds. He received the last of them at Gettysburg, a wound sufficiently serious to render him unfit for additional field service. Consequently, he ended up in the Invalid Corps, later known as the Veteran Reserve Corps (VRC), tending a desk until assigned to duty in the bureau. By the end of the war, Stone could have chosen to resign his commission with honor and return home. Instead, he continued his duty in the VRC, an organization that was very selective when it came to commissioning its officers. In March 1866, he accepted the more difficult duty of service with the bureau in South Carolina, arguably one of the most difficult postings for a soldier in a blue frock coat. In 1869, when the bureau was winding down its operations, Stone left South Carolina, leaving military service one year later. Interestingly, he returned to South Carolina with his wife, a Pennsylvanian Quaker schoolteacher he had met there, and practiced law. Again, he ended up in the thick of things, becoming involved in the Ku Klux Klan trials in 1871 and 1872. After reviewing Williams's introduction, if a reader does not grasp Stone's dedication to the cause and the importance of his work, the report itself should clinch the case.

Stone's account understandably covers familiar ground for students who have read the official bureau records or De Forest's book. All overburdened local agents and district bureau men performed similar duties with inadequate resources, at times in dangerous circumstances. They supervised contracts between whites and blacks, tried to work out fair settlements at harvest time, dealt with intransigent whites, concerned themselves with school teachers and school houses, and worried about distributing just enough food relief to impoverished blacks and whites. Stone's record thus confirms much of what is in the official documents. However, it also includes his own candid views about his experiences and the South Carolinians he encountered, which may

be the most interesting material in the report.

It became obvious to Stone from his earliest encounters with South Carolina and its residents that he was an outsider in a strange land. Unrestrained in casting judgment, he observed that white and black South Carolinians failed to exhibit the brisk business manner of productive New Englanders. The towns he encountered did not meet his approval as they lacked the neat and industrious appearances of those places he had known in New England. Agricultural practices were backward and unproductive, not the least because of the lingering effects of slavery. That evil institution not only had stunted economic development, in Stone's assessment, but also had turned white South Carolinians into prideful, cruel individuals who were unable to control their passions, who considered "drunkenness ... an amiable weakness of trifling moment," and who had kept the black population in utter ignorance (p. 21). These former masters feared change and were opposed to internal improvements, such as building railroads, because they worried that "blacks would become restive if they should come in contact with large parties of free laboring white men" (p. 78). Change was necessary, Stone judged, and unsurprisingly it would come when white and black South Carolinians started to act more like New Englanders, especially in their commitment to education, the source of "all those blessings which freedom offers to those who will strive for them" (p. 19).

As Stone worked toward that goal, he encountered the obstacles that plagued Reconstruction and the bureau throughout the South. White intransigence and violence was an obvious one, but there were others. Freedpeople might have wished for transformative educational opportunities, but as the circumstances of the black community at Hamburg illustrated, they were impoverished "and could not pay the teachers and no aid could be obtained from Northern societies" (p. 40). Poor blacks still looked to the future, desirous of educational and economic opportunities, but, as Stone discovered, their former masters clung to the past. "They did not renounce their old notions in regard to the war or the superiority of the white race," Stone learned, even when doing so would have been politically advantageous for them (p. 61).

Stone's experiences also reveal how the unusual nature of the agency itself limited what it could accomplish. Bureau men, such as Stone, encountered circumstances with which federal officials had not had to worry before the war and which they were ill prepared to handle after

the surrender. Stone, therefore, improvised, whether it was in figuring out ways to handle contract negotiations or to resolve the problems of troubled marriages. On one occasion, Stone stepped well beyond his legitimate powers to settle a family dispute and, “by a rather arbitrary stretch of authority,” ordered a disgruntled freedwoman to return to her husband (p. 9). Stone’s experiences in the end allowed for some optimism about the freedpeople’s future. “Moreover, their desire for occupying more respectable positions has increased in consequence of the new opportunities which have presented themselves to them,” he observed, “and they have shown a laudable ambition to acquire property and homes of their own and to educate their children.” He also noted that they remained peaceful, despite the abuses of their former masters. “All they need now to make them a thriving, orderly class of citizens,” he predicted, “is protection before the law and freedom from illegal restraints” (p. 63). That was the rub, as Stone would later learn after his bureau service ended.

By the time the bureau was winding down its operations, Stone understood that both whites and blacks had to work things out for themselves within the new constitutional context of postbellum America, even if troubles between the races continued. By the end of 1868, Stone believed the bureau was powerless to do much more for

the freedpeople and that military force was an appropriate response to injustices only “when exerted at the request of the proper civil authorities” (p. 103). At least in 1868, Stone believed—as did most of his colleagues—that civil law, especially after the freedmen obtained the vote, trumped federal intrusion into the lives of the people.

The editors of this volume have chosen to be as unobtrusive as possible in presenting Stone’s fascinating account of his bureau experiences. In fact, beyond the introduction, the scholarly apparatus is minimal. This approach has its benefits, especially in that it allows Stone to speak for himself without the distraction of excessive footnotes. But readers who are unfamiliar with the bureau or Reconstruction would have benefited from better direction to the available scholarship that could supplement their understanding of Stone’s experiences. That said, anyone interested in the Civil War era and the travails of Reconstruction owe a debt of gratitude to the editors for making this important document available.

Note

[1]. “National Archives Completes Freedmen’s Bureau Records Project,” press release, February 8, 2007, www.archives.gov/press/press-release/2007/nr07-55.html.

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Citation: Paul A. Cimbala. Review of Johnson, Suzanne Stone; Johnson, Robert, *Bitter Freedom: William Stone’s Record of Service in the Freedmen’s Bureau*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. February, 2009.

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