

# Catherine Edmondston and Reconstruction

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

Beth G. Crabtree and James W. Patton, eds., *"Journal of a Secesh Lady": The Diary of Catherine Ann Devereux Edmonston* (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, 1979), pp. 709–728.

## As you read...

Catherine Anne Devereux Edmondston was the daughter of a wealthy North Carolina planter. In 1846 she married Patrick Muir Edmondston, a South Carolinian, and they eventually settled on a plantation in Halifax County, North Carolina, where they were living in 1860. In June of that year Edmondston began a journal in which she recorded her thoughts and observations of current events.

In these excerpts from her diary of 1865–1866, she describes her frustration with emancipation and her family's attempts to control its former slaves. In them, we can see how white southerners gradually came to accept the end of the war and of slavery, yet found ways to maintain their power and authority in the new system.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In what ways did Catherine Edmonston try to maintain the racial and social divisions that had existed during slavery?
2. How did Catherine describe African Americans? What words did she use? What comparisons did she make?
3. Which former slaves did Catherine like? Why? Whom did she dislike? Why?
4. How did Catherine describe the Freedmen's Bureau and the people who assisted former slaves?
5. What were some of Catherine's frustrations with the new system of free labor?
6. What were some of the ways the former slaves tried to negotiate with their former master?
7. How did Catherine expect her former slaves to behave towards her and her husband?
8. What conflicts arose between the free people and the Edmondstons? How were they resolved?
9. Catherine wrote that some of her former slaves refused to take wages, while others seemed "grateful" for their contracts. Why do you think these former slaves chose to act this way? When former slaves refused to comply with the wishes of Catherine and her husband, what happened? How might the conduct of the Edmonston's affect the way these former slaves acted?

## May 8, 1865

Yesterday came Sue & Rachel with the astounding news that brother had arrived & had gone to Montrose <sup>1</sup> with the intention of freeing his negroes & soon after came Messrs Gilliam & W Smith & announced that he had done so & that father was to follow suit this afternoon. I could not understand it. It seemed inexplicable to me & suicidal in the last degree....

This morning came father & told us to our relief that both the girls & the gentlemen were mistaken, that brother & himself had merely announced to their negroes that *Mr Schofield* <sup>2</sup> said they were free, but that they (their masters) did not believe they were, but that if any of them wished to go away and try their freedom to go *now* — at once & to stay away, that their places could be supplied, but that in the fall when their own rights & those of the negroes were defined & settled there would be ample time to talk of it & that if they were then free that they should be paid for their labour out of this year's crop. In this last clause I think they made a mistake. Make no promises, so as to have none to break, is a good rule in dealing with both children and negroes & negroes are but ignorant children at best...

## May 12, 1865

Such a week as the past has been, I hope never to see again. Excitement & anxiety have ruled each day, until at last I became heartsick & weary & longed for rest, rest, come how it would, only rest. As we had feared, father's negroes either misunderstood or pretended to misunderstand father's and brother's talk with them. On Monday several of them were absent from work & one man kept his wife at home contrary to plantation discipline. A firm & resolute hand checked all disobedience at home, however, and a visit to Weldon<sup>3</sup> satisfied some of the absentees, who have almost all returned, professing to have found out that they were better off as they were. We have lost none here. The poor creatures seem as usual, only terribly dejected, & are much more tender & affectionate in their manner to us than ever before. It is a terrible cruelty to them, this unexpected, unsolicited gift of freedom, & they are at their wits ends. Their old moorings are rudely & suddenly cut loose, & they drift without a rudder into the unknown sea of freedom. God help such philanthropy.

## October 1, 1865

The Freedman's Bureau, facetiously known as the "Free Nigger's Christ" is the source of the most unmitigated annoyance to our whole country. The very old Fiend himself could scarce have devised a more effectual method of irritation or a more perfect system of perpetual worry. No sooner are the negroes seemingly contented & beginning to work steadily than some Major, Capt, or Lieut in the Free negro service<sup>4</sup> with more time than brains announces a Speech to the Freedmen in Halifax, when "down goes the shovel & the hoe" and presto away they all start to drink some new draught<sup>5</sup> from the "Free Spring," &

they come home with their heads so filled with their fancied rights, so puffed up with what the “New Orders” to be issued at Christmas are to give them, that discipline & order are at an end for days.

## December 29, 1865

Christmass has come & gone without disturbance of any kind. We dined with father & found that he was in the same unsettled condition as regards labour for the coming year as ourselves. Two of his people & one of ours have since Christmass signed a contract for ‘66, but all the rest exhibit the force of inertia in a most striking degree. They admit that they do not know what is to become of them or where they are to go next year & yet they will not agree to work so as to secure their future from want.... They will do nothing but sleep & get wood for themselves, & even tho living under his roof, eating his bread, & burning his wood, with but two exceptions they refuse to do the daily necessary plantation labour, the care of the stock — & here ere the year closes I must pause to record the *only* instance of faithfulness which out of so large a number has fallen under my immediate notice. These are our servants Owen & Dolly. Ever since the Surrender, when to use the Negro expression “Free sistence (system) just broke out,” they have been unwaveringly true, faithful, cheerful, industrious, & grateful. They both turn with scorn & abhorrence from even the mention of wages. They desire only to live & to be treated for the future as they have hitherto lived & been treated. Not only have they been faithful themselves but they have earnestly endeavoured to make others follow their example. The little comfort we have enjoyed this summer is due to them alone....

In direct contrast to them stands Henry, our foreman & for fifteen years Mr E’s right hand man. He has enjoyed his master’s favour & confidence in no small degree, confided in & confiding, he has been trusted with everything, & up to the Emancipation showed himself worthy of — honest affection, etc., and faithful. His perquisites of office have been large. Exempt from hard work, he was more like a manager than a field hand. His allowances & privileges were—

1. A house with 4 rooms & 2 fire places
2. Garden & half acre of ground
3. A double allowance of cloth — both winter and summer
4. double allowance of Meat
6. do meal<sup>6</sup>
7. Wife & children fed & clothed as the other women & children were
8. Wife, tho able bodied allowed to stay in the house & work so as to cook for him
9. A blanket, a hat, & 2 prs of shoes every year.
10. Occasionally boots extr & Over Coat extra
11. A boy to haul & cut his wood for him
12. Unlimited Chickens, Ducks, Bees, etc. — (liberty to raise)
13. A horse when he asked it to ride off on Sundays & holidays—
14. From \$25 to \$50 at Christmass regulated by the amt of the crop.

Such were some of Henry’s privileges, & I do not think I have enumerated them all.... Even whilst enjoying his perquisites as foreman he became negligent and utterly careless of his

master's interest, refused "to keep the time" of the people, & has been & is the head & front of all the discontent and grumbling on the plantation. Singularly intelligent for a negro, he professes to be unable to understand his rights or his position, makes the most exorbitant demands for the one and is dissatisfied with the other. He broke his contract in Nov about the child, my favorite little handmaiden Betsy, by demanding her immediate delivery to him, altho he had agreed to let her remain until Christmass, & when he found that his master would not be so imposed upon & that if he persisted he would be forced to leave himself, he became overwhelmed with contrition & begged in the most abject manner that she & him be allowed to remain and besought his Master that he would let it be as it had between them in years gone by. He claimed her, however, at Christmass when she was of course resigned to him, altho he knew I had a large family & only Owen & Dolly to wait on us, & she has accordingly spent this week in idleness under the paternal roof...

## January 4, 1866

We went to bed last night congratulating ourselves that at length we had begun to taste some of the immunities of Free negroism. The negro contracts were all signed by them & witnessed & they seemed not only contented but *thankful* for them. Such of the people as Mr E did not wish, or who did not wish themselves to remain, were moving or had moved off goods & chattles<sup>7</sup> & we had a feeling as tho' some of our cares were at an end. At least we had no longer negro children or babies to be responsible to God for; that was shifted to the shoulders of the Yankees and their parents, Yankees first, for taking them from good & competent attention. Nay, Mr E need no longer trouble himself to make a parcel of lazy women support themselves. That care was henceforth their husbands. Their idleness was no charge to him. All seemed merry as a marriage bell, but presto, scarcely was breakfast dispatched when up came every negro man on the plantation, H F Solomon alone excepted, to announce that they were discontented with their contracts, wished higher wages, more privileges & only ten hours work and to say that their bargain must be changed because they had some body somewhere was going to "*do better*." This Mr E. steadily refused, set forth the folly of signing an agreement one day & drawing back the next for some idle rumour or for some unprincipled emissaries sent forth to tamper with them & by promises & word of mouth bargains which it cost nothing to break, showed them that their arch tempter, one Smallwood, did not give them so much as he did, that he hauled them no wood & would charge them for the pasturage of their hogs, etc., etc., but no.

The Demon of change & discontent was abroad, so with sullen looks & unwilling footsteps they went off discontentedly to begin the year's labor.

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### On the web

#### Journal of a Secesh Lady

<http://nc-historical-publications.stores.yahoo.net/478.html>

The complete diary of Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston may be purchased from the North Carolina Office of Archives & History. Educators and students receive a 10% discount.

### From slavery to sharecropping

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/programs/civiced/resources/docs/Sharecropping.pdf>

After the Civil War, a central element of the Southern economy -- slavery -- was abolished. As those newly free sought rightful payment for farming and former masters strove to maintain their control and profits, a system of sharecropping and tenant farming developed. In this lesson from the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, students will learn about the history of sharecropping and tenant farming through a Power Point presentation and discussion, photo analysis, and reading primary source documents. Students will apply their knowledge creatively by writing and performing a role play between a sharecropper and landowner.

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### Notes

1. Montrose was one of the Devereux's plantations in North Carolina.
2. In April 1865, General Schofield, who commanded Union troops in North Carolina, issued a proclamation to the people of North Carolina announcing that the war was over. Due to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, slaves in most parts of North Carolina were free. The actions of Catherine's father and brother were in response to Schofield's announcement that the war was over, although these men did not believe that their slaves were really free. In December 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified, outlawing slavery throughout the United States.
3. Weldon, North Carolina, is the main town in Halifax County, where Catherine and her family lived.
4. Edmondston is referring to the Freedmen's Bureau, which was established by the federal government to help free people adjust to life after slavery.
5. *Draught* means something drunk or consumed — usually an alcoholic beverage. Edmondston used this word to suggest that the former slaves became intoxicated by the promises of the Freedmen's Bureau.
6. Cornmeal. *Do.* means ditto, or same as above.
7. "Goods and chattels" means all of someone's personal possessions.

### About the author

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