

“SUFFERING IN THE SOUTH” (1867)

In March 1867, a Union officer stationed in South Carolina wrote to the New York Times that he found Southern whites to be “politically great sinners.” But, at the same time, he found them to be miserable sinners. “They need so much pity! . . . There is a family within a mile of this place living in a ‘brush house,’ a shanty of fresh pine branches. It consists of a mother who had a son killed, another daughter of thirteen and a grandchild of three.”

The officer was told by the oldest daughter that she had searched the village for work but there was none. He furnished the family with some clothes from the Freedman’s Bureau (technically the clothing was for the ex-slaves). “How they will live through the year I cannot imagine. They were poor before the war but not like this.” The 13-year-old told the officer that she had had no shoes the previous winter and it had made her sick.

The long letter was a plea for Northerners to be generous. He particularly thought the Reconstruction Acts passed by the Republican Radicals would devastate southern families. And not just the poorest were suffering. A formerly well-to-do family he knew of could not pay their taxes. “They have a house, but can’t sell it; land, but can’t hire cultivators.”

In this area suffering was general but no people were worse off than those who lived along the route of Sherman’s march—mainly through lower and eastern Lancaster County as the army headed for Cheraw and North Carolina during February of 1865. Houses had been burnt. Stored grain was taken to feed Union horses. Every animal that could be captured—horses, mules, cattle, hogs and chickens—was taken to feed an army on the march. Often what could not be carried away was destroyed.

There was no seed to plant crops and 1866 was a bad crop year to boot. By the spring of 1867 newspaper headlines told the story: “Cry for Bread,” “Destitution in Lancaster,” “Suffering in Lancaster,” etc.

The Charlotte Times reported, “Let it be distinctly understood that this suffering is not prospective or probable, but actual and present, and that unless timely assistance is afforded, many deaths may ensue.” Charlotte and Rock Hill each sent a few hundred bushels of corn.

The newspapers played a large part in publicizing the need for help. Editors pointed out that pride kept many people from asking for charity. The editors also pointed out that few had wagons or teams of horses to carry the corn from the railroad to the countryside where it was most needed. They appealed to those who had teams of horses to volunteer to distribute the corn.

The state of Maryland sent 15,000 bushels of corn to the state of South Carolina. Lancaster District was allotted 300 sacks. The state of

Kentucky sent grain. While border states like Maryland and Kentucky were more likely to be sympathetic to the plight of the Deep South, there was a good response from Boston and New York City. The Female Relief Association of New York City and Democratic Party leaders in New York were particularly generous.

It was not easy to get grain and other foodstuffs to Lancaster. There was no railroad. The nearest depots were in Chesterville and Rock Hill. From those sites the sacks of grain were placed on wagons and moved by ferries across the Catawba river. The Lancaster Ledger praised the owners of Cureton Ferry for charging only half price for any grain that crossed the river into Lancaster from York District.

John F. G. Mittag, a native of Hagerstown, Maryland, had come to Lancaster 40 years earlier as a school teacher. He had married Anna McKenna, daughter of Lancaster village's wealthiest man. Mittag had taught Dr. J. Marion Sims as a boy and kept in touch with Sims over the years. In 1867, Dr. Sims, the Father of Gynecology, had numerous patrons of wealth.

Mittag contacted Dr. Sims and Northern friends with whom he had long corresponded and asked for help. While it is not possible to know precisely the amount of money and goods raised by Mittag and Sims, there is no doubt that the two together secured much outside aid. Sims also gave the county 60 acres of land for the establishment of a "Poor House," land that still serves as the site for a number of county buildings.

By Louise Pettus