

# Week 8

## Charlotte Forten and Freedom Schools

### IN BRIEF

★ After the Civil War, the federal government initiated an effort to integrate Black citizens (many of whom had been enslaved before the war) into the reunified United States. We call this period **Reconstruction**, and it lasted from about 1865 to 1877.

★ Congress established the **Freedmen's Bureau** in 1865 to provide practical aid to freed Black people. Unsurprisingly, the Bureau was controversial, and one of its most vocal opponents was Andrew Johnson, who became President after Lincoln's assassination. It was almost always underfunded and understaffed.

★ The Freedmen's Bureau, northern benevolent societies, and Black abolitionists like Charlotte Forten helped establish **schools** for formerly enslaved people in the southern United States during Reconstruction.

★ **Education** was considered an essential part of emancipation, and Black students flocked to overcrowded, underfunded schools.

★ The establishment of these free public schools helped lead to the creation of **public education** for everyone in the United States.

❑ Listen to **Lecture 8: Charlotte Forten, Education, and Reconstruction after the Civil War.**

- Take notes in your history notebook.
- Add significant dates to your U.S. history timeline.
- Consider the following questions. (*Don't just scribble down the first answer that comes into your head. Work through the toolkit to really consider the W, R, E, C, T, A, and I for each question.*)
  - What role did people like Charlotte Forten play in Reconstruction education initiatives?
  - What were some of the challenges to establishing free public education during Reconstruction?
  - What was it so important to freed men and women to have access to education?
  - How successful do you think the Freedmen's schools were in achieving their goals?
  - What were the long-term implications of the Freedmen's schools?

❑ Read **Chapter 8: Charlotte Forten: Education in the Reconstruction South** in your textbook.

○ Complete a biography page for Forten in your history notebook.

❑ Explore the following primary sources.

*(Remember, when you're reading primary sources, you always want to consider their rhetorical situation:*

- *Who is the speaker?*
- *What is the occasion?*
- *Who is the intended audience?*
- *What is the purpose of the text? (Why was it written?)*
- *What is the subject of the text?*
- *What is the tone of the text?*

*If you need to review these elements of the rhetorical situation, review your Year One Critical Thinking materials.)*

## DOCUMENT 8-A

### “Life on the Sea Islands”

CHARLOTTE FORTEN  
*Atlantic Monthly*, (May 1864)

... The school\* was opened in September. Many of the children had, however, received instruction during the summer. It was evident that they had made very rapid improvement, and we noticed with pleasure how bright and eager to learn many of them seemed...

... The first day at school was rather trying. Most of my children were very small, and consequently restless. Some were too young to learn the alphabet. These little ones were brought to school because the older children — in whose care their parents leave them while at work — could not come without them. We were therefore willing to have them come, although they seemed to have discovered the secret of perpetual motion, and tried one's patience sadly. But after some days of positive, though not severe treatment, order was brought out of chaos, and I found but little difficulty in managing and quieting the tiniest and most restless spirits. I never before saw children so eager to learn, although I had had several years' experience in New England schools. Coming to school is a constant delight and recreation to them. They come here as other children go to play. The older ones, during the summer, work in the fields from early morning until eleven or twelve o'clock, and then come into school, after their hard toil in the hot sun, as bright and as anxious to learn as ever. Of course there are some stupid ones, but these are the minority. The majority learn with wonderful rapidity. Many of the grown people are desirous of learning to read. It is wonderful how a people who have been so long crushed to the earth, so imbrued as these have been, — and have so great a desire for knowledge, and such a capability for attaining it. One cannot believe that the haughty Anglo-Saxon race, after centuries of such an experience as these people have had, would be very much superior to them. And one's indignation increases against those who, North as well

*The “school,” as you probably guessed, is the **Sea Island Mission** school, established as part of the Port Royal Experiment.*

Remember **John Brown**? He was the radical abolitionist whose raid on the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia was one of the factors in hastening the Civil War. Brown was captured, tried, and executed for treason in 1859. (See Week 6 for a refresher.)

You know **Toussaint L'Ouverture**, though the memory might not have instantly clicked. We met him last year when he was leading the Haitian revolution — the first successful revolution of enslaved people in modern world history.

as South, taunt the colored race with inferiority while them themselves use every means in their power to crush and degrade them, denying them every right and privilege, closing against them every avenue of elevation and improvement. Were they, under such circumstances, intellectual and refined, they would certainly be vastly superior to any other race that ever existed.

After the lessons, we used to talk freely to the children, often giving them slight sketches of some of the great and good men. Before teaching them the “John Brown” song, which they learned to sing with great spirit, Miss T. told them the story of the brave old man\* who had died for them. I told them about Toussaint\*, thinking it well they should know what one of their own color had done for his race. They listened attentively, and seemed to understand. We found it rather hard to keep their attention in school. It is not strange, as they have been so entirely unused to intellectual concentration. It is necessary to interest them every moment, in order to keep their thoughts from wandering. Teaching here is consequently far more fatiguing than at the North. In the church, we had of course but one room in which to hear all the children; and to make one's self heard, when there were often as many as a hundred and forty reciting at once, it was necessary to tax the lungs very severely...

## DOCUMENT 8-B

### “Life on the Sea Islands”

CHARLOTTE FORTEN  
*Atlantic Monthly*, (May 1864)

... Christmas night, the children came in and had several grand shouts. They were too happy to keep still.

“Oh, Miss, all I want to do is to sing and shout!” said one little pet, Amaretta. And sing and shout she did, to her heart's content.

She read nicely, and was very fond of books. The tiniest children are delighted to get a book in their hands. Many of them already know their letters. The parents are eager to have them learn. They sometimes said to me, — “Do, Miss, let de chil'en learn ebryting dey can. We nebber had no chance to learn nuttin', but we wants de chil'en to learn.”

They are willing to make many sacrifices that their children may attend school. One old woman, who had a large family of children and grandchildren, came regularly to school in the winter, and took her seat among the little ones. She was at least sixty years old. Another woman... came daily, and brought her baby in her arms. It happened to be one of the best babies in the world, a perfect little “model of deportment,” and allowed its mother to pursue her studies without interruption.

... Daily the long-oppressed people of these islands are demonstrating their capacity for improvement in learning and labor. What they have

accomplished in one short year exceeds our utmost expectations. Still the sky is dark; but through the darkness we can discern a brighter future. We cannot but feel that the day of final and entire deliverance, so long and often so hopelessly prayed for, had at length begun to dawn upon this much-enduring race...

While writing these pages I am once more nearing Port Royal. The Fortunate Isles of Freedom are before me. I shall again tread the flower-skirted woodpaths of St. Helena, and the sombre pines and bearded oaks shall whisper in the sea-wind their grave welcome. I shall dwell again among "mine own people." I shall gather my scholars about me, and see smiles of greeting break over their dusk faces. My heart sings a song of thanksgiving, at the thought that even I am permitted to do something for a long abused race, and aid in promoting a higher, holier, and happier life on the Sea Islands.

## DOCUMENT 8-C

### Report on the Condition of the South

CARL SCHURZ\*  
December 1865

... Some planters thought of establishing schools on their estates, and others would have been glad to see measures taken to that effect by the people of the neighborhoods in which they lived. But whenever I asked the question whether it might be hoped that the legislatures of their States or their county authorities would make provisions for negro education, I never received an affirmative, and only in two or three instances feebly encouraging answers... . Hundreds of times I heard the old assertion repeated, that "learning will spoil the n— for work," and that "negro education will be the ruin of the south." Another most singular nation still holds a potent sway over the minds of the masses — it is, that the elevation of the blacks will be the degradation of the whites.

The consequence of the prejudice prevailing in the southern States is that colored schools can be established and carried on with safety only under the protection of our military forces... . There may be a few locations forming exceptions, but their number is certainly very small...

In the letter of General Kirby Smith occurs the following statement referring to the condition of things in Mobile, Alabama: "Threats were made to destroy all school-houses in which colored children were taught, and in two instances they were fired. The same threats were made against all churches in which colored people assembled to worship, and one of them burned. Continued threats of assassination were made against the colored preachers, and one of them is now under special guard by order of Major General Woods."

*Carl Schurz was a German-American who served as a brigadier-general for the Union Army and became an important figure in the U.S. Republican party. After the Civil War ended in 1865, President Johnson asked Schurz to take a tour of the southern United States and report his findings to help the federal government develop a plan to bring those states back into the Union.*

## DOCUMENT 8-D

*A commander for the Union Army, after the Civil War, **Oliver Otis Howard** became the head of the Freedmen's Bureau. He was passionate about championing rights for Black people politically through his work and also personally – he worked to integrate his Washington, D.C. church and helped found the first Black college in the United States – Howard University, which is named for him.*

## The Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard

GENERAL OLIVER OTIS HOWARD

1907

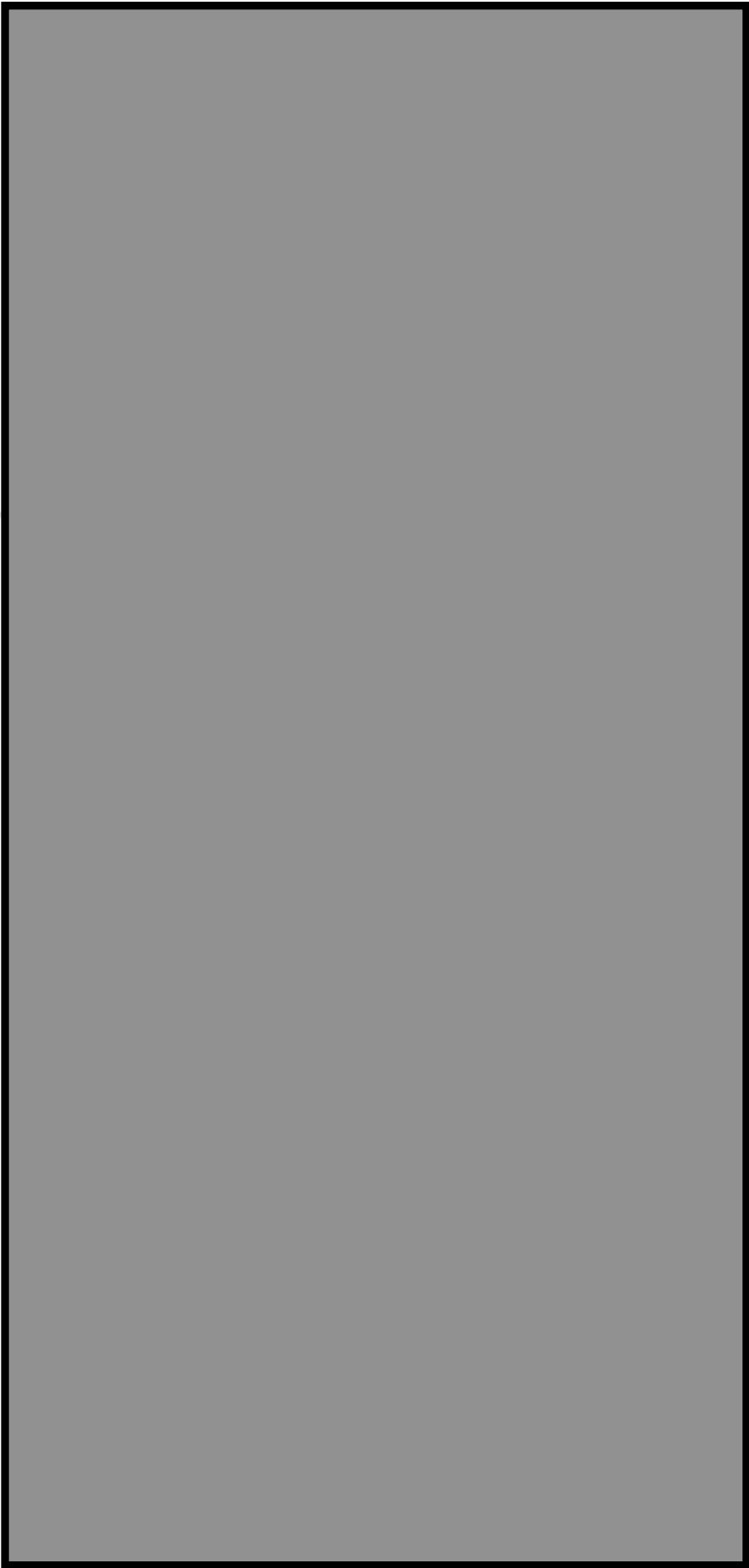
The many benevolent organizations of the country ... gave themselves vigorously to the teaching of children and youth and the planting of schools...

... [T]he first important circular issued from headquarters May 19, 1865 ... announced well-defined principles of action... "I invite ... the continuance and cooperation of such societies [benevolent and religious organizations]. I trust they will be generously supported by the people, and I request them to send me their names, list of their principal officers, and a brief statement of their present work.

... The education and moral condition of these (the freed) people will not be forgotten. The utmost facility will be afforded to benevolent and religious organizations and State authorities in the maintenance of good schools for refugees and freedmen until a system of free schools can be supported by the recognized local government..."

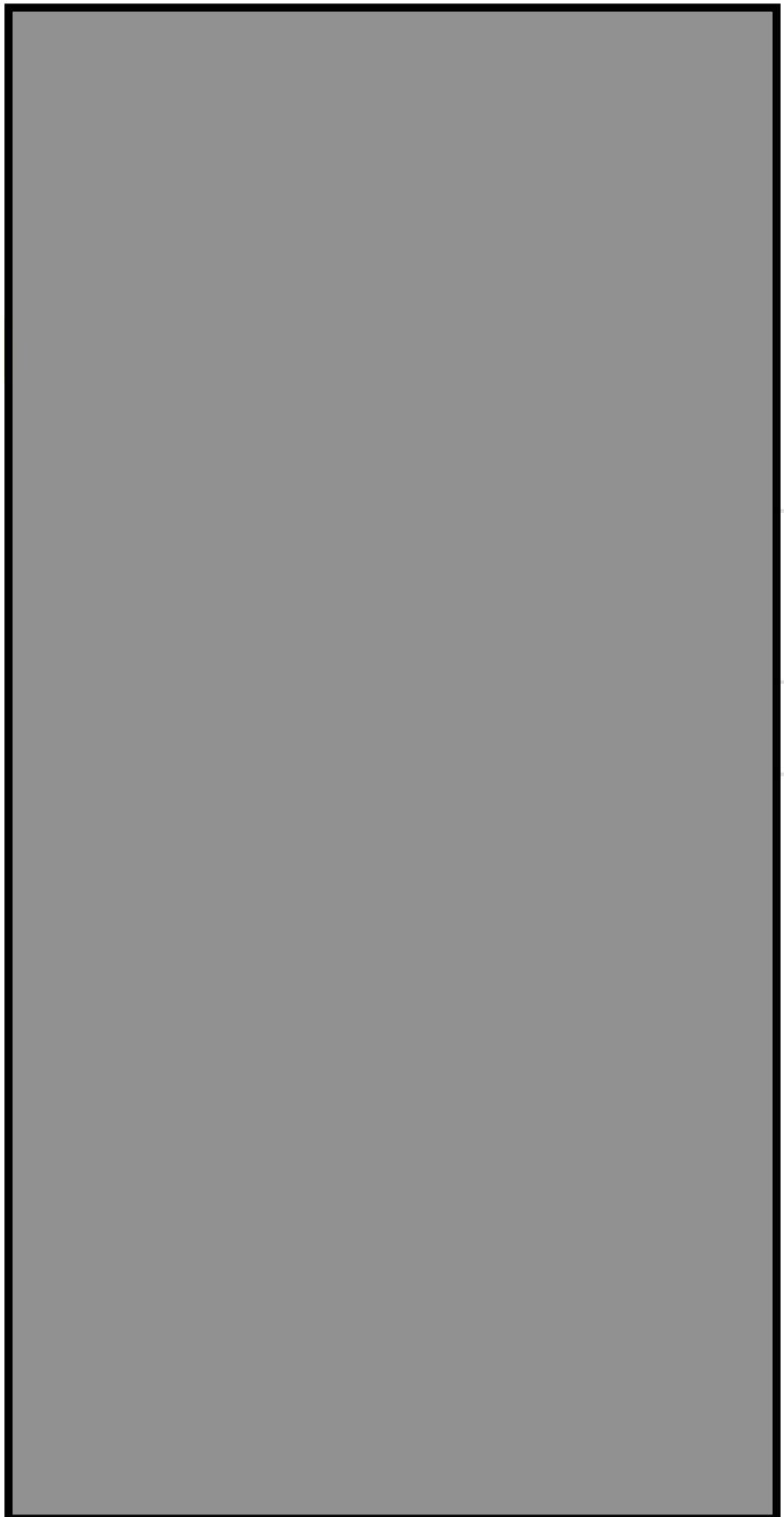
Let me repeat, that in all this work it is not my purpose to supersede the benevolent agencies already engaged in it, but to systematize and facilitate them.

The next step after public announcement was to introduce in the field some practical systematic arrangement. So much overlapping and interference one with another were found among the workers that I hastened to appoint a school superintendent for each State. He was generally a commissioned officer detailed from the army and placed under the direct authority of the State assistant commissioner of the Bureau. The majority of the schools throughout the South were elementary. They were more flourishing in those localities which had been for six months or more within the lines of our armies. After peace many Government schools were added to those of the benevolent societies, being brought into existence by Bureau officials. These were self-supporting from the start. The educational work was in every way helped by the extraordinary ardor of the pupils and the enthusiasm of the teachers, fed by the societies behind them who at this time voiced the generous devotion of benevolent people every where. Yet the ruling classes among the Southern whites were deeply offended. They said at first: "If the Yankees are allowed to educate the negroes as they are now doing, the next thing will be to let them vote." No one can describe the odium that awaited the excellent, self-denying teachers of freedmen in those days. Our first official summary of these schools declared that: "doubtless the treatment to which they, the teachers, have been subjected is due in part to the feelings engendered by war, but it is mostly attributable to prejudice against educating the blacks, and the belief that the teachers are fostering social equality." Even then, however, there were notable exceptions to this opinion and conduct in



*Congress, led by radical Republicans, passed laws that returned the land of former plantation owners to the people who had worked it, redistributing the big commercial farms to create small family farms for the freed Black people in the south. President Johnson, who wasn't a fan of radical reconstruction, quickly revoked the redistribution policy and returned plantations to their former owners.*

*The records of the Virginia Superintendent of Education included here offer a representative glimpse of the pressing matters pertaining to schools in the southern states during Reconstruction – other states faced the same issue with regard to building, financing, and inspection of schools.*



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FILE

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*Letter requesting a Schoolhouse for the Freedmen Bureau of R. F. & A. L.  
Office of U.S.A. Comm. 2a D 10 S D Va Manassas Va.*

*March 25 1868*

*Bvt. Lt. Col.*

*S. P. Lee USA*

*Sub Asst Comm. 10 S D Va*

*Colonel*

I have the honor to request that the sum of \$100.00 be appropriated for the purpose of assisting in the erection of a School house for the use of the Freedmen at Buckland in Prince William Co. This School will be self sustaining and will have about 40 scholars. The Union League promised \$150.00 towards the building. Mrs. Maria Chappell will give the land for the purpose. I believe this one of the best locations for a School in this county and earnestly request that the above sum may be provided by the Bureau.

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Despite the scattered instances of open violence & a general opposition to freedmen's schools & their teachers, the school program thrived & expanded. Opening in Oct., 1865 with 67 schools, 136 teachers, & 8,528 pupils, by March, 1866, there were 145 schools, 225 teachers & 17,589 pupils. A report in April reveals that the American Missionary Association was supporting 53 teachers, the New York Nat[ional] Freedmen's Relief Association, 36; the New England Freedmen's Aid Society, 20; the Baptist Home Mission Society, 24; the True Friends Society of Philadelphia, 49; & the Episcopal Missionary Society, 5. 29 teachers & 1,057 pupils were in self-supporting schools.

## DOCUMENT 8-G

### Report on the Status of Schools in Virginia

R. M. MANLY\*

1865-1870

*R. M. Manly, Virginia's State Superintendent of Schools, reported to the Bureau's General Superintendent, Henry Alvard, that between January and June, 1869, Virginia schools had the highest attendance with 181 white teachers and 173 African American teachers.*

... The long delay in the political reconstruction of the State still leaves the schools dependent upon foreign aid. Probably there is not another southern State in which the ruling class have such a poor opinion, not only of public free schools, as a meaning of education, but of education itself.

... The State has, however, taken one step forward. The new Constitution with its public free schools system which has been standing on the table of the sick man for 15 months — nauseous [sic] but wholesome drought — has just been swallowed, not willingly it is true, but angrily and ruefully. The patient's dislike for the medicine and hate for the doctor that compounded it, may retard and somewhat modify the effect of the dose, but cannot destroy it. Ample provision is made in that instrument for the gradual introduction & permanent support of a comprehensive system of public free schools. The wealthy & aristocratic will oppose & retard the movement, but it will certainly go forward until the free school shall be as common, as excellent and as honored, as before the war, it was scarce and contemptible.

... The number of native white Virginians opening colored schools or seeking employment is considerable. These are generally women in reduced circumstances or broken down school masters — persons already sufficiently humbled to be willing to earn their necessary bread by teaching colored children. While such teachers are not the best, they are better than none for children who are as yet entirely untaught. As far as possible the superintendent will reach these schools and endeavor to improve them.

... Not less than 50 thousand of the late slave population of this State have learned to read and write. More than three hundred are in Normal Schools — many who three or four years ago did not know the alphabet are acceptable teachers. Many are pursuing advanced studies at home and abroad. Youth is the instructor of age. I have seen a little colored girl

of ten years, reading fluently and intelligently reading editorials of a city daily from the bulletin board to a group of eagerly listening gray haired men and women whose hearty and appropriate responses told that they appreciated the thought of the writer as well as the miracle the child was working by translating the unmeaning type matter to their comprehension.

... The schools have been the principal cause of the hopefulness and patience with which they [freed persons] endured the hunger, the nakedness and managed the wrongs of their transition state. Their churches have been great gainers in an increasing demand for minutes of better qualifications and a softening of the extravagances of their forms of worship. The schools have developed self respect and a desire for permanent homes and the comforts and decencies of life.

**❑ Now it's time to put it all together.** Using your notes from the lecture, your reading from the textbook, and the primary sources you have considered, develop thoughtful answers to the following discussion questions. Remember to use your toolkit letters to develop a complete answer.

*(BEFORE YOU START: Can you summarize the important idea of each of these documents? Remember, we're looking here specifically at education of Black people during the Reconstruction period. What does each of these primary sources tell us about the education of Black people during Reconstruction? Why do you think each of these documents was included in your reading for this week?*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was Charlotte Forten's role in Reconstruction? What does she want people to understand about her Black students? What does she want her students to understand?
2. What methods that were used to halt or hinder public education in the Reconstruction South? What were the motivations behind these efforts? In what ways did these efforts succeed? In what ways were they unsuccessful?
3. How did Black soldiers, adults, and the children of freed persons respond to the Bureau's education initiative?
4. Did the Freedmen's Bureau appropriate adequate funds for the establishment and continuation of public schools? Explain.
5. What caused the conflict between Black educational initiatives and planters in the Reconstruction South? In what ways did the federal government exacerbate that conflict?
6. How might a strong public school system for all citizens benefit all the citizens of a state? What overrode this potential benefit for some powerful white Southerners?