

Gallery Walk Activity

Penn School, St. Helena Island, South Carolina (taken between 1863 and 1866)



Charlotte Forten, a free African American woman activist and educator from Philadelphia, was amongst the teachers dispatched to the Sea Islands to staff the Penn School where newly freed African American children and adults were taught during the Civil War.

Forten kept a journal during those years and her writings about her time in the Sea Islands was published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. In this excerpt Forten describes her students. Her students may appear in this photo of Penn School students which was taken during the Civil War.

“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 eberyting dey can. We nebber hab 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—who had one of the best faces I ever saw—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.

Port Royal Island, South Carolina Cypress swamp, 1865



This is a photo of the swamp that surrounds Port Royal. In order to emancipate themselves, enslaved African Americans had to cross these swamps to reach the Union forces. In this excerpt, Charlotte Forten recounts the experience of two children escaping through the swamps:

“We were also told the story of two girls, one about ten, the other fifteen, who, having been taken by their master up into the country, on the mainland, at the time of the capture of the islands, determined to try to escape to their parents, who had been left on this island.

They stole away at night, and travelled through woods and swamps for two days, without eating. Sometimes their strength gave out, and they would sink down, thinking they could go no farther; but they had brave little hearts, and got up again and struggled on, till at last they reached Port-Royal Ferry, in a state of utter exhaustion. They were seen there by a boat-load of people who were also making their escape. The boat was too full to take them in; but the people, on reaching this island, told the children’s father of their whereabouts, and he immediately took a boat, and hastened to the ferry. The poor little creatures were almost wild with joy when they saw him. When they were brought to their mother, she fell down ‘jes’ as if she was dead,—so our informant expressed it, — overpowered with joy on beholding the ‘lost who were found.’”

St. Helena Island, South Carolina (taken between 1863 and 1866)



Taken in the Sea Islands during the Civil War, this is a photo of freedpeople living on St. Helena, the island on which the Penn School is located. Consider the changes that took place in their lives when they were able to emancipate themselves by escaping to the relative safety of areas occupied by the Union Army. What challenges might they face in these years?

Contraband Camp, Richmond, Virginia, 1865



During the early months of the Civil War in August 1861, Congress passed and President Lincoln signed the First Confiscation Act. It stated that the Union forces could seize and confiscate property used in the Confederate war effort—including enslaved people.

The Union Army Set up camps to provide shelter, rations, clothing, medical care, education and sometimes, employment. The term “contraband”—property confiscated in war— was used to describe African Americans in Confederate states who were able to escape their enslavers and make their way to a location controlled by Union Forces. This a contraband camp in Virginia in 1865, four years after the Confiscation Act went into effect.

Enslaved African Americans and their Living Quarter Louisiana, 1861



This is a photograph of enslaved African Americans and their living quarters in the state of Louisiana. Compare the structures pictured here with those pictured in the photograph of the Virginia contraband camp. Which is would be preferable living space in extreme heat, cold, snow or rain?