

Slave Children of New Orleans, January 30, 1864

Introduction

The following article appeared in Harper's Weekly on 30 January 1864. The author wanted to promote photographs that were being sold to raise money for the education of freed slaves in New Orleans. The children chosen for the series were chosen for their fair skin to draw attention to the fact that slavery was not a mere matter of color. If a child's mother was a slave, then he or she was a slave regardless of skin color. The short biographies contained in the article offer us a rare (and possibly unique) record of slave children.

“To the Editor of Harper's Weekly:

The group of emancipated slaves whose portraits I send you were brought by Colonel Hanks and Mr. Phillip Bacon from New Orleans, where they were set free by General Butler. Mr. Bacon went to New Orleans with our army, and was for eighteen months employed as Assistant-Superintendent of Freedmen, under the care of Colonel Hanks. He established the first school in Louisiana for emancipated slaves, and these children were among his pupils. He will soon return to Louisiana to resume his labor.



Rosa, Charley & Rebecca (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC 05111.02.1052)

Rebecca Huger is eleven years old, and was a slave in her father's house, the special attendant of a girl a little older than herself. To all appearance she is perfectly white. Her complexion, hair, and features show not the slightest trace of negro blood. In the few months during which she has

Slave Children of New Orleans, January 30, 1864

been at school she has learned to read well, and writes as neatly as most children of her age. Her mother and grandmother live in New Orleans, where they support themselves comfortably by their own labor. The grandmother, an intelligent mulatto, told Mr. Bacon that she had "raised" a large family of children, but these are all that are left to her.

Rosina Downs is not quite seven years old. She is a fair child, with blonde complexion and silky hair. Her father is in the rebel army. She has one sister as white as herself, and three brothers who are darker. Her mother, a bright mulatto, lives in New Orleans in a poor hut, and has hard work to support her family.

Charles Taylor is eight years old. His complexion is very fair, his hair light and silky. Three out of five boys in any school in New York are darker than he. Yet this white boy, with his mother, as he declares, has been twice sold as a slave. First by his father and "owner," Alexander Wethers, of Lewis County, Virginia, to a slave-trader named Harrison, who sold them to Mr. Thornhill of New Orleans. This man fled at the approach of our army, and his slaves were liberated by General Butler. The boy is decidedly intelligent, and though he has been at school less than a year he reads and writes very well. His mother is a mulatto; she had one daughter sold into Texas before she herself left Virginia, and one son who, she supposes, is with his father in Virginia. These three children, to all appearance of unmixed white race, came to Philadelphia last December, and were taken by their protector, Mr. Bacon, to the St. Lawrence Hotel on Chestnut Street. Within a few hours, Mr. Bacon informed me, he was notified by the landlord that they must therefore be colored persons, and he kept a hotel for white people. From this hospitable establishment the children were taken to the "Continental," where they were received without hesitation.



Learning is Wealth. (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC 08475)

Slave Children of New Orleans, January 30, 1864

Wilson Chinn is about 60 years old, he was "raised" by Isaac Howard of Woodford County, Kentucky. When 21 years old he was taken down the river and sold to Volsey B. Marmillion, a sugar planter about 45 miles above New Orleans. This man was accustomed to brand his negroes, and Wilson has on his forehead the letters "V. B. M." Of the 210 slaves on this plantation 105 left at one time and came into the Union camp. Thirty of them had been branded like cattle with a hot iron, four of them on the forehead, and the others on the breast or arm.

Augusta Boujey is nine years old. Her mother, who is almost white, was owned by her half-brother, named Solamon, who still retains two of her children.

Mary Johnson was cook in her master's family in New Orleans. On her left arm are scars of three cuts given to her by her mistress with a rawhide. On her back are scars of more than fifty cuts given by her master. The occasion was that one morning she was half an hour behind time in bringing up his five o'clock cup of coffee. As the Union army approached she ran away from her master, and has since been employed by Colonel Hanks as cook.

Isaac White is a black boy of eight years; but none the less intelligent than his whiter companions. He has been in school about seven months, and I venture to say that not one boy in fifty would have made as much improvement in that space of time.



Isaac and Rosa. (The Gilder Lehrman Collection GLC 05111.02.1051)

Robert Whitehead--the Reverend Mr. Whitehead perhaps we ought to style him, since he is a regularly-ordained preacher--was born in Baltimore. He was taken to Norfolk, Virginia, by a Dr. A. F. N. Cook, and sold for \$1525; from Norfolk he was taken to New Orleans where he was bought for \$1775 by a Dr. Leslie, who hired him out as house and ship painter. When he had earned and paid over that sum to his master, he suggested that a small present for himself would

Slave Children of New Orleans, January 30, 1864

be quite appropriate. Dr. Leslie thought the request reasonable, and made him a donation of a whole quarter of a dollar. The reverend gentleman can read and write well, and is a very stirring speaker. Just now he belongs to the church militant, having enlisted in the United States army. A large photograph of the whole group which you reproduce has been taken, and cartes de visite of the separate figures. They are for sale at the rooms of the National Freedman's Relief Association, No. 1 Mercer Street, New York, or I will send them by mail on receipt of the price: \$1 for the large picture, 25 cents each for the small ones. The profits to go to the support of the schools in Louisiana.”

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction, examine the photograph sample, and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. Explain why these children were photographed.
2. How did the placement of the description of the children and their photographs in *Harper's Weekly* gain sympathy and support for the freed slaves? (An extra credit assignment might be to research the influence of *Harper's Weekly* during the Civil War).
3. Explain the deliberate placement of “fair skinned” children alongside children with darker complexions.

Slave Children of New Orleans, January 30, 1864



Page from an album of 200 cartes de visite. (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC 04609) p.27.