

**LETTERS FROM THE WEST INDIES:
RELATING ESPECIALLY TO THE
DANISH ISLAND ST. CROIX, AND
TO THE BRITISH ISLANDS ANTIGUA,
BARBADOES AND JAMAICA**

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Letters from the West Indies: Relating Especially to the Danish Island St. Croix, and to the British Islands Antigua, Barbadoes and Jamaica by Sylvester Hovey

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SYLVESTER HOVEY

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FROM

THE WEST INDIES:

RELATING ESPECIALLY TO THE DANISH ISLAND

ST. CROIX,

AND TO THE BRITISH ISLANDS

ANTIGUA, BARBADOES AND JAMAICA.

BY

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ADVERTISEMENT

BY THE COMMITTEE OF THE AMERICAN UNION.

THE American Union for the Relief and Improvement of the Colored Race was formed in Boston in January, 1835. A principal object in its formation was to collect and diffuse facts in respect to the condition of slavery and of the African race, whether existing on this Continent and its Islands, or in Africa. One small volume of letters on the more northern of the slaveholding States in this country, and also various documents, have been published by the Union. Other volumes have been partially prepared, but the pecuniary embarrassments of the times have prevented their completion and publication. The object appears to the Committee as important as ever. Nothing, except the blessing of the Almighty, can be more seasonable than well-authenticated reports of the condition of the children of Africa, especially such of them as are just emerging into the rank and privileges of freemen. If this Society can contribute something, even though it should be limited, towards the diffusion of important

information, or the correction of prejudice, its establishment will not have been altogether in vain.

The Committee commend the little volume on the state of the emancipated British colonies to the public with confidence that it will be a valuable auxiliary in the great work of African improvement. If they are not mistaken, the Letters exhibit an unusual degree of candor, industry, sound judgment and discriminating observation. The highly respected author, for several years a Tutor in Yale College, and more recently a Professor in Williams and Amherst Colleges, spent a considerable portion of the years 1835-6 and of 1836-7 in the West Indies, though only a part of the time, as agent of the Union. His facilities for obtaining correct information are detailed, with other circumstances; by himself in the introductory Letter.

Boston, April 10, 1838.

LETTER I.

To the Executive Committee of the American Union for the Relief and Improvement of the Colored Race.

GENTLEMEN,

Having determined, in compliance with your request, to visit several of the West India islands, for the purpose of examining the progress of Negro emancipation, the question arose, in what form I could best present to you the results of my investigations. In some respects a preference seemed due to a journal or series of letters, written from day to day, which should record facts and statistics as they were obtained. But having only a short time to devote to the undertaking, and being sufficiently aware of the debilitating effects of a tropical climate, I concluded that I should best accomplish the wishes of the Committee by employing my time and strength, while on the ground, in collecting materials for a Report, which should be written after my return. This plan has also the additional recommendation, that it will allow the omission of many unimportant details, which would naturally find a place in a journal; and will permit me to give a more succinct and general view of the whole subject. I regret that a combination of adverse circumstances, among which was a protracted and severe sickness, has so long prevented

the completion of my Report, but as the subject is one of permanent interest, and as light in relation to it is needed as much as ever, I hope that the information which I have to communicate, will not be entirely useless.

If I do not misapprehend the state of public sentiment and the wants of the community on this subject, the most acceptable offering which I can present, is a general development of the condition of slavery in the West Indies before emancipation took place ; a brief description of the two systems which have been adopted at different islands, viz. *immediate emancipation* and what is usually called the *apprenticeship system* ; together with the difficulties, and the degrees of success, which have severally attended them in practice. If the time should ever come, when slavery is to be abolished in this country, and a specific plan of emancipation should be required, the details of systems, which have already been tried with success, cannot be examined with too much care. But at present the public mind has not reached that point. As a community we are yet to be convinced that *any* system is practicable. To remove this skepticism and prepare the way for active measures, it will be useful to show, that a plan has been successfully adopted in circumstances similar to our own ; and, at the same time, to give such an outline of it, as will explain how it has met and obviated difficulties, which have generally been considered insurmountable.

It is not to be denied that the abolition of slavery in

a community is a work of no ordinary magnitude. Wherever slavery is established, it becomes so interwoven with the institutions of the country, as apparently to constitute an integral part ; and, at first view, it seems impossible to remove it without tearing down the very frame-work of society. Changes of such magnitude are not ordinarily effected, either in the material world, or in the body politic, without a convulsion ; and it is no wonder if those whose life, and property, and happiness, are so deeply involved, should pause and consider, before they venture their all, upon the success of an untried experiment. Slavery is beginning to be considered an evil too intolerable to be borne ; and, at the same time, one from which we cannot escape except by encountering others, little if any less appalling. In such circumstances a single ray of hope, from whatever source it may come, cannot but be welcome. And any plan for the removal of the evil, which has been found upon experiment in a good degree successful, must be hailed as the appearance of a new star in our firmament, designed by an overruling Providence to encourage hope, and to quicken and guide us in our efforts.

With such views of the present condition of our country, and of the importance of any information upon a subject which at present so much agitates it, I approach the labor of preparing a Report on the working of the new systems of freedom in the British West Indies only with satisfaction. For though it must be granted that much less has yet been achieved than philanthropy