

The Southern Famine Relief Commission:
Feeding the South while Founding Reconciliation

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The Southern Famine Relief Commission (SFRC), founded in 1867, was a New York City-based organization dedicated to relieving the suffering in the South caused by the famine. Even though the Commission was headquartered in New York City, they collected funds from all over the country, and many of its executive officers had served with the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War, including Frederick Law Olmsted.¹ The funds raised were sent either directly to agents in the south or were used to purchase corn, which was then shipped south and distributed by trusted agents. By the beginning of 1868 the SFRC had completed its fundraising activities and disbanded. Even though the SFRC functioned for only a short period of time, it began the process of nationwide reconciliation through its fundraising procedures for the relief of the southern famine, under the pretense of chivalric assistance to dependent women and children.

The records of the SFRC have been preserved at the New York Historical Society (NYHS) in Manhattan. One of the commission's final acts was donating all their records, including correspondence, record books, subscription books, newspaper clippings and meeting minutes to the NYHS for preservation.² These records, which are available on microfilm, provide invaluable insight into the immediate aftermath of the war, and the ways in which people strove to overcome the devastating divisions caused by the Civil War.³

¹ Witold Rybczynski, *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the 19th Century* (New York: Touchstone Book, 2000), 198, 279.

² *Final Proceedings and General Report of the Southern Relief Commission: New York, November, 1867.* (New York: Wm. H. Arthur & Co. Stationers, 1867), 5.

³ In recent years the SFRC has become at least a footnote in several histories on relief work done in the south but virtually no in depth research has been done on the SFRC itself. The only notable exception remains Judith Giesberg's essay "The Fortieth Congress, Southern Women, and the Gender

David W. Blight, in his book *Race and Reunion*, stresses the importance of soldiers' reconciliation to American memory, of developing the mythology that both sides were equally brave and fighting for an equally just cause, and that the Union won because of superior numbers. Tied to the growth of the Lost Cause, such reconciliation only occurred after an extended period of time and did not begin immediately after the war.⁴ While Blight's work helps historians understand the erosion of white support for African American rights after Reconstruction, it fails to address the challenges of reconciliation between civilians (of those who lived in the war zones but were not members of the army); the records of the SFRC provide invaluable insight into how this process was begun. Heather Cox Richardson, in her book *West from Appomattox*, offers another perspective on reconciliation and the reconstruction of America. She holds that it was western expansion, or the concept of western expansion, that allowed the country to put aside sectional differences in order to focus first on the West and then the nation as a whole.⁵ Richardson's ideas about the importance of the west in re-forging the nation prove more valuable to understanding the commission's records. The key difference, though, is that it was not eastern interference in the West that helped to re-forge old bonds, but western involvement in the east, or more accurately the south, that aided in the process of reconciliation.

Politics of Postwar Occupation," which appears in *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation and the American Civil War*.

⁴ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001), 20-26.

⁵ Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 345-347.

The early part of the commission's correspondence revolves around determining first whether or not there was an actual famine in the south, and if so how bad conditions were in the various regions. The findings of the commission's inquiries were worse than expected. General J.E. Johnson was the most succinct when he wrote, "The amount of suffering is certainly far beyond anything ever before imagined in America."⁶ The south had been suffering famine cycles since the beginning of the Civil War. During the war white and African American civilians in the south had seen their food supplies confiscated by both the Confederate and Union armies. Beginning in 1862 with the advent of hard fighting, the South was unable to produce the needed amount of food as more men entered the Confederate army and were killed, and slaves escaped to freedom. Plantation owners placed further strains on the southern food supply. Unwilling to change traditional economic patterns, planters continued to cultivate vast quantities of cotton, rather than foodstuffs, but due to the Union blockade they were unable to sell their crops to bring in the needed food supplies they could have otherwise grown.⁷ Civilians regularly lost the battle for food with the military, and stories of hunger became common, especially in places with heavy fighting like Virginia, where the consumption of rats during the war has been documented.⁸ The civilian population also suffered both the physical loss of food and psychological damage when troops

⁶ Letter from J.E. Johnson to the Southern Famine Relief Commission, April 6, 1867, Southern Famine Relief Commission Collection, New York Historical Society, Reel 2.

⁷ Joan E. Cashin, "Hungry People in the Wartime South: Civilians, Armies, and the Food Supply," 165-166.

⁸ Cashin, "Hungry People in the Wartime South", 164.

destroyed food that they could not confiscate.⁹ Unsolicited letters seeking aid from the SFRC often cited the recent war as a cause of the famine. When on February 6, 1867 J.F.G. Miltag of Lancasterville, South Carolina wrote seeking aid for the area in which he lived, he said, “This section suffered severely from the armies and unless something is done promptly many human beings must perish.”¹⁰

The most psychologically damaging aspect of the war for southern civilians may have been Sherman’s March. Starting in Atlanta, Georgia and leading through to Greensboro, North Carolina, Sherman’s March witnessed some of the worst destruction of private property the war had seen. All along his path civilians’ property was destroyed, including their food supplies and farming equipment. Sherman estimated the damages at approximately \$100,000,000.¹¹ In Georgia a Freedman’s Bureau Agent recognized the destruction of Sherman’s March, a progressive step towards admitting Union involvement in the famine and calling for national intervention. When writing to the SFRC he indicated that the “northwest of the state, it being in the line of General Sherman’s march, and the section ... most seriously affected by drought the past year” was the most direly in need of assistance, and would need to receive the most aid from the Commission.¹² The results of such destruction could also be seen in the death tolls. Columbia, South

⁹ Union troops would typically destroy the food supply of those deemed pro-Southern and Confederate troops would destroy the supplies of those deemed pro-Union.; Cashin, “Hungry People in the Wartime South,” 168-169.

¹⁰ Southern Famine Relief Commission Collection, Letter from J.F. Miltag to Edward Bright, February 6, 1867, Reel 1. See also Henry Scland to Edward Bright, February 9, 1867, and Mary C. Mayo to Edward Bright, February 18, 1867.

¹¹ James M. McPherson, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 254-255.

¹² Southern Famine Relief Commission Collection, Letter from C.G. Sibley to Edward Bright, February 15, 1867. Reel 1.

Carolina witnessed over a hundred deaths due to starvation in the last weeks of the war.¹³ Those who did survive the war were left weakened by hunger, and although no long-term studies of the effect of hunger during the Civil War have been conducted, Joan E. Cashin has drawn some conclusions on their health from her research, writing, "civilians were probably susceptible to illnesses that other malnourished people have experienced, ...children of the war generation may have been shorter than their parents and afflicted with physical problems such as cerebral palsy..."¹⁴ With a civilian population weakened by the privations of the war they were more susceptible to famine conditions in the post-bellum period.

Immediately after the war the southern agricultural system was primed for failure. Aside from a lack of supplies, there was a lack of men. A large number of crops could not be planted as the Confederate army had suffered high casualties, freedmen were relocating and freedwomen were coming out of the fields.¹⁵ The introduction of free labor into the South also raised the cost of farming. If, or more often when, payment failed to materialize freedmen and freedwomen had to provide food for their families on their own. This food was provided either through personal garden plots or by raising a cash crop for sale to purchase supplies.¹⁶ The cash crop grown by most freedmen, yeomen farmers, and plantation owners in the south was cotton. The high rates for which cotton sold before the war allowed for growers to

¹³ Joan Cashin, "Hungry People in the Wartime South: Civilians, Armies, and the Food Supply," in *Weirding the War: Tales from the Civil War's Ragged Edges*, ed. by Steven Berry (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, in press): 173.

¹⁴ Cashin, "Hungry People in the Wartime South," 173.

¹⁵ Many freedmen relocated within the south and continued to farm but changes in farming patterns resulted in smaller crops, and disruptions leading to the eventual breakdown in the plantation system and the development of sharecropping.; Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2007), 44-45.

¹⁶ Foner, *Nothing But Freedom*, 55.

purchase any supplies that were not produced in the South and import any additional foodstuffs as needed. Cotton, along with other cash crops, as well as the food crops, were all affected by the natural disasters, leaving no safety net for farmers, and no way to buy seeds for the coming season.¹⁷

A series of natural disasters (heavy rains followed by drought and army worms) hit the south simultaneously. Both drought and army worms had been occurring for decades in the south, occasionally at the same time. In Louisiana a combination of army worms and poor weather conditions had led to 'short crops' or near crop failures in 1840, 1841, 1846 and 1854, eventually leading the farmers to switch to sugar cane cultivation.¹⁸ What allowed farmers to survive these 'short crops' was the fact that the effects tended to be limited to a small region in the South, man power was still at full strength, and land had not been devastated by war. In 1866 heavy rains followed by droughts, linked with limited plantings, many of which were destroyed by army worms, resulted in the famine conditions.¹⁹ There are few varieties of army worms but they are characterized as a caterpillar of a moth, which moves rapidly up to ¼ mile in 24 hours, with a life expectancy of 7 to 10 days, distance traveled depends on available food supplies and they consume most plant matter.²⁰ Army worms would eat all crops, including the cotton crops, decimating the fields. A young Union soldier who had remained in the south in 1866 to try his hand at cotton farming discovered how destructive the worms could be;

¹⁷ Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Iron Confederacies: Southern Railways, Klan Violence, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 170-171.

¹⁸ D. Clayton James, "The Tribulations of a Bayou Boeuf Store Owner, 1836-1857," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 4, no.3 (1963): 245-246.

¹⁹ Richardson, *West from Appomattox*, 48.

²⁰ "Army Worm Plague Checked," *The Science News-Letter* 5, no.172 (1924): 8.

what began as a very profitable venture quickly became a business proposition in which he was lucky to break even. Abram Pitt Andrew wrote to his father on August 16, 1866:

Also since last writing the army worm has reappeared. I wrote you that it had entirely disappeared, and we had began [sic] to flatter ourselves that we would see it no more-The worm did disappear as a worm-having changed to a fly-and these flies had laid innumerable eggs-The sun killed some and delayed the others in hatching, but it seems the sun was not hot enough to entirely destroy them and last week they commenced work upon the cotton-They have eaten about one hundred acres for us-in all-in spots in different parts of the field-and are now again webbed up-in the chrysalis state and will come out as flies and multiply. About the 1st of Sept they will eat up the entire field-& perhaps sooner. They eat the tender part of the leaves leaving the skeleton of the stalk and leaves. I presume we may make two hundred & fifty to three hundred bales-not-withstanding the worm-This will be sufficient to reimburse us our investment and leave something for Mrs. Carson-but of course all profit is out of the question, at present prices.²¹

While Andrew emerged from his cotton-growing scheme intact, most of those who depended on their cotton crop were unable to make ends meet.

The famine was real but the North had difficulty believing matters were that bad. The exact reason for this distrust is uncertain, but it may be possible to attribute it to the conflicting reports on conditions in the south, which northerners had been receiving throughout the war, or as apathy directed toward a recent enemy. The SFRC looked to combat this disbelief, and send aid to those in the South, by collecting accurate information from a variety of sources, including officials in the military and Freedmen's Bureau, and old friends from the South. The correspondence reveals that information was exchanged with the Freedmen's Bureau, officially the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, in

²¹ Andrew Gray, "The Carpetbagger's Letters," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Historical Association* 20, no.4 (1979), 445.

Washington D.C., Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Howard Potter, a member of the Executive Committee and chairman of the 'Subcommittee on Purchasing and Forwarding', forwarded the contact information for the district commanders and governors in the four states with which the SFRC appears to have been primarily concerned. The names given to him by General Howard, and sent on to the commission on February 11, 1867, included: for North Carolina, Colonel Buaeford, District Commander, and Governor Worth; for South Carolina, Major General R.K. Scott, District Commander, and Governor Orr; for Alabama, Major General Wager Swayne, District Commander, and Governor Paton; and for Georgia, Colonel Sibley, District Commander at Savannah, Major General Roger, District Commander at Chattanooga, and Governor Jenkins.²² These men were counted as reliable sources not only for information on actual conditions in the South but also for the distribution of aid. It is worthwhile to note that the Commission counted on both military and civilian sources for their information even at the most prominent levels.

The men General Howard recommended, and their staffs, also made regular reports back to the SFRC on the distribution of corn and what relief was still needed. Their reports make clear that they were providing aid to both white and black families. Major General Swayne wrote, "I need not assure you that it will give me pleasure, as it will the Governor to do all I can to turn it to the best account without respect of race or opinion, which is precisely our own opinions in such matters." A few days later a letter arrived from C.G. Sibley echoing those feelings, "I would

²² Southern Famine Relief Commission Collection, Letter Howard Potter to Edward Bright, February 11, 1867, Reel 1.; *Final Proceedings*, 22.

recommend that the Governor be allowed to arrange for the distribution under the supervision of Bureau agents to prevent loyal white and colored destitutes from being overlooked.” Bureau and Commission agents throughout the South echoed these sentiments, that corn was to be distributed to those most in need regardless of race and color, with none being overlooked.²³ Such actions ensured that all civilians in need in the south received aid (or would receive aid, provided enough was sent) helping to prevent false feelings of neglect from springing up between any one group in the south and charitable organizations in the north.

While the correspondence suggests that agents wanted to distribute goods fairly, how accurate a picture their letters paint is difficult to determine. William Stone’s record of service as a Freedmen’s Bureau Agent in South Carolina reveals that the issue of corn sent by the SFRC (called the Southern Famine Relief Association in his records) was distributed to both white and black families, while the later batch of corn was distributed to only white families. This change in the distribution of aid may have been due to new policies at the SFRC or to the increased aid from the federal government.²⁴ A change in the way aid from the SFRC was being used could also be a result of internal policy changes within the Freedman’s Bureau. By January 8, 1868 the Washington D.C. headquarters for the

²³ Southern Famine Relief Commission Collection, Letter, Wager Swayne to Edward Bright, February 12, 1867. Reel 1.; C.G. Sibley to Edward Bright, February 15, 1867. Reel 1.; See also W.W. Tond to Edward Bright, June 20, 1867, Reel 2.; Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, Charleston, SC to Edward Bright, April 2, 1867, Reel 1.

²⁴ William Stone, *Bitter Freedom: William Stone’s Record of Service in the Freedmen’s Bureau*, ed. by Suzanne Stone Johnson and Robert Allison Johnson, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 48-54.

agency wrote to thank the Commission for their assistance in cases where the law prohibited the Bureau from assisting.²⁵

The press played a vital role in communicating to the public that there was indeed a famine. Accounts of suffering were publicized in newspapers, agents from the South posted letters seeking aid, Southerners became aware of philanthropic northern organizations that they could write to seeking assistance, and both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line could track the progress of SFRC and other such organizations. Newspaper entries primarily took one of three forms: they were reports, event notices, or letters (addressed either to the editor or to the public), which acted as a form of advertising to attract aid.

Letters addressed to the editor or to the public provide some of the most interesting details on the severity of the famine and how the relief efforts actually functioned. Public letters or notices were often placed by agents coming from the south- these were men elected by their towns or counties to travel north and seek aid for the community; records of their activities can be found in the SFRC because many of these agents inevitably ended up turning to the SFRC for help. Those coming from the south seeking aid were forced to do so by the economic depression in the south, but the fact that they did seek aid in the north, a recent enemy, and often received what assistance they sought suggests that these public notices also

²⁵ Southern Famine Relief Commission Records, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands to James M. Brown, January 8, 1868. Reel 1.; Further study on the parties involved with SFRC may also uncover new possibilities. Including the blanket statement about race beginning a tactic on the part of southern officials and overwhelmed officials in the south to placate northern beneficiaries who they all perceive as abolitionists; or the corresponding secretary Edward Bright may have had a more radical bent to his politics than the rest of the executive committee, something that came out in the correspondence but not the press releases, or the Commission itself was divided on racial issues and the earlier supplies were controlled by those supporting greater equality who lost ground to a those members with a more racist viewpoint.

worked to build new bonds between former enemies. One agent who sought aid was S.H. Griffin. On March 30, 1867 his appeal for aid appeared in a Cincinnati paper:

I am here for the purpose of soliciting aid for the starving people of Henry County, Georgia. *Men, women and children are actually starving-* naked and miserable, they must die if relief is not sent them, and at once. I have been appointed by the court and sent here to ask bread for thirty-two hundred hungry inhabitants of Henry Country.²⁶

While agents from the south would include the men suffering in their community it was less common for the Commission to publicize such relief efforts; rather they focused publicity on aid to women and children or omitted to whom the aid was being given and instead focused on the quantity, with an emphasis on the work still to be done. In many ways this was a misleading tactic as the commission did aid men as well as women.

Letters sent to the SFRC requesting aid came from Southern men and women. The vast majority of the letters coming from southern women sought aid for just themselves and their children. Women often stressed being without support and of good reputation, often with young children to care for or, if elderly, no one to care for them. Women established their reputations through a variety of means-by having officials vouch for their reputations, asserting that they had remained at home while the Federals passed through or in asking that their request be passed onto the Ladies Association.²⁷ Men, on the other hand, writing to the SFRC were most often seeking aid for a community. These men were typically either ministers or other prominent citizens writing on behalf of a large number of families, a parish

²⁶ Southern Famine Relief Commission Records, Cincinnati S.H. Griffin, Newspaper clipping in Correspondence, Reel 1.

²⁷ Southern Famine Relief Commission Collection, April 1867, Reel 2.

or town, seeking aid for the group. While not able to provide food themselves the men still acted as community protectors and leaders by seeking aid in place of the women, an act that would help restore traditional gender balances and make them appear less dependent.²⁸ Letters sent to the commission headquartered in New York from their agents in the south also expressed these same gendered sentiments. In Alabama the distribution of corn was “highly appreciated by the starving widows + orphans.”²⁹ In South Carolina “poor women pale and lean walk ten fifteen + eighteen miles to get a half bushel of corn...”³⁰

Only a few men, such as Francis Y. Glover and James D. Longan, sought aid for just their families. Both felt the need to justify seeking aid for such a limited number. Francis Y. Glover was a former planter, and in his letter discusses in extensive detail in economic situation in the South Carolina and why he is now unable to provide for his family or workers as he previously did and adds, “I write this with the view of leaving my address in your possession, and in the hope that some change in financial affairs might inable [sic] you to render assistance unto a broken down planter.”³¹ Letters such as these from Glover, stressing the fall of even the planter class to pensioners, helped lead the commission to send aid to all regardless of class.

²⁸ Restoring traditional gender balance, by making southern women dependent once more was an essential part of healing on the part of Northerners, the scars of carrying out hard-war against civilians during the Civil War. Men also sought to alleviate the traditional stigma of becoming dependent by seeking aid through longstanding fraternal organizations such as the Masons.; Judith Giesberg, “The Fortieth Congress, Southern Women, and the Gender Politics of Postwar Occupation,” in *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation and the American Civil War*, ed. by LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 185-190.; Southern Famine Relief Commission Records; 1867, Letter from Masons, Cherokee Lodge no.66, Rome Floyd Co., Ga, Reel 1.

²⁹ Southern Famine Relief Commission Records, June 20, 1867, W.W. Tond to Edward Bright, Reel 2.

³⁰ Southern Famine Relief Commission Collection, April 3, 1867, William Martin to Edward Bright, Reel 1.

³¹ Southern Famine Relief Commission Collection, January 28, 1867, Francis Y. Glover to SFRC, Reel 1.

James D. Longan was not a fallen planter – he instead appears to have come from a slightly more modest background but felt even more compelled to explain the previous steps he had taken to try to find work, to seek aid from a relief organization in the South and was only turning to the SFRC as a last resort in order to keep his family from starving.³² The correspondence supports the idea that the SFRC did not see itself as giving long-term aid and thereby creating dependents, which is what it was feared the Freedmen’s Bureau was doing; rather the SFRC was there to provide aid only as a last resort and primarily to those who were already dependents.

The letters published in the north by the SFRC or supporters of the commission stressed the importance of relieving the southern famine as a humanitarian effort and as a patriotic duty. While the daily correspondence reveals gender norms were reappearing in the south and being adhered to when seeking aid, those who supported the commission’s work were seeking to repair the national tears, not just the gender imbalance, which had been created during the war. Published March 29, 1867 as a letter to the editors of the *Evening Post*, this unnamed writer sought to stress the importance of the SFRC and the necessity of the Commission’s and Ladies Association’s work, writing, “People need not be afraid of doing too much, nor of availing of either organizations; the fear is that we will not do half enough. ...This is a great work of charity, philanthropy and patriotism, in which all should be proud to join.³³ Charity and philanthropy are easy to understand in the

³² Southern Famine Relief Commission Collection, April 8, 1867, James D. Longan to James Brown, Reel 2.

³³Southern Famine Relief Commission Collection, *Commercial Advert*, March 29, 1867, Reel 4.

context of sending food to the suffering, but patriotism requires a second look. The Civil War had not even been over for two years yet the SFRC was calling it a patriotic duty to assist the South; such an act suggests that the commission was looking not simply to relieve suffering but to bring the South back into the Union, to begin the national healing process immediately rather than let old wounds fester. Another undated document in the correspondence files likewise suggests that the commission was looking at the larger picture, at more than just aiding the south, but also at how such assistance could heal the nation. "The – that liberal communities from the states and territories of the far west – at once save many lives, relieve great suffering and must have a most happy influence upon the prosperity of the nation."³⁴ Even if such a statement went unpublished, its very existence reveals that the commission was looking to the national level, and that they saw the potential for reconciliation through relief efforts, a reconciliation that focused on the civilians but still left room for the soldiers to participate if they so chose. A civilian reconciliation based on relief efforts also left open room for the participation of African Americans. Although the SFRC never stressed aid to African American families, aid was given on a by-need basis, regardless of color, and the American Freedman Union Commission expressed a desire to assist the commission in their relief efforts.³⁵

Press rereleases were different in the North and South and at times projected a biased view of the aid being sent by the SFRC. The Commission made some

³⁴ The document had some sections crossed out and written over, making the entire statement difficult to decipher. The above are the sections which can be clearly read. Southern Famine Relief Commission Collection, in Correspondence section, April, Reel 2.

³⁵ The AFUC already had 700 teachers spread throughout the south, they offered to assist the commission in gathering information and distributing corn. Southern Famine Relief Commission Collection, February 20, 1867, AFUC to Edward Bright, Reel 1.

attempt to balance these beliefs in the south by making aid recipients aware of where relief funds originated. Northern newspapers published lists of donations, southern papers did not, so the SFRC had to make a decision to raise awareness in the south. They settled on the relief funds arriving from the San Francisco Relief Commission.³⁶ While the letter does not specify why they selected this particular set of funds, they are the obvious choice. San Francisco, California was part of the far west. Although nominally part of the Union during the Civil War, they had little direct participation in comparison to Northeast and Mid-Western states, and as such they could represent the future of the nation, neither North nor South but West, a new type of America. By informing southerners of where aid was coming from the relief effort began to cross sectional bridges- a northern- based organization, using western funds to help the south, stopped being about making the south indebted to the north and instead turned this into a national healing, a process of creating new Americans of everyone by putting the war behind in an effort to help “fellow countrymen.”

Donations to the SFRC were recorded through a variety of sources, including letters, telegrams, newspaper articles, receipt books and subscription books. The two most important sources are receipt and subscription books. The subscription books recorded pledges ranging from \$50 dollars to \$5,000 made by individuals and organizations all over the country. The receipt books are a more detailed account, recording funds received by the commission no matter how small the amount, as

³⁶ Southern Famine Relief Commission Collection, June 11, 1867 Wager Swayne to Edward Bright, Reel 2.

well as all outgoing funds. Since the receipt books record the smaller donations they are a better source for tracking the involvement of the American people in general.

The receipts for donations in the records of the SFRC reveal several patterns in how the Commission functioned and who was involved. Overall the commission appears to have functioned as an umbrella organization or a repository for similar organizations across the country, collecting funds for the relief of the Southern Famine. Several of these commissions or associations were located in the northeast, such as the Boston Relief Committee, Rochester Southern Relief Commission, and the Providence Relief Fund. But relief efforts were not limited to the northeast- there was also the Gainesville Ohio Relief Commission and on the west coast, with the largest contributions, the San Francisco Relief Commission.³⁷ While some large donations came from secular groups the majority of donations were made by religious organizations. Typically churches donated either under the name of their church, congregation, or via their minister. For donations coming from the Midwest the largest donations tended to be from churches, while in the east the largest donations tended to be from individuals and companies.³⁸

The receipts also reveal that this was not a purely northeastern effort; from those whose location of origin could be clearly identified, the majority were from New York state, and the majority of those that remain unclear appear to have addresses related to present day New York City. More donations were received

³⁷ Southern Famine Relief Commission Records, Record Books, Reel 3.

³⁸ The SFRC accepted donations from all faiths as noted by the \$425 donation from "A Few members of Hebrew Camp Gates of Prayer" . When making notations on the church they often made an abbreviated notation of the denomination such as "Ref Prot D Chh Kalamazoo 104" for the \$104 donation from the Reformed Dutch Protestant Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Southern Famine Relief Commission Records, Record Books, Reel 3.

from Ohio, Iowa, Michigan, and Illinois than Delaware, New Hampshire, Rhode Island or Vermont (See Appendix). Donations also came in from Border States such as Maryland and Missouri. Farther west, as mentioned before, the largest donations came from the San Francisco Relief Commission, but donations were also received from Nevada.³⁹ No direct donations were recorded in the receipt books as coming from the south but the requests for aid reveal that traditional means of relief had failed in the south and no one had the funds to contribute. The correspondence also reveals that the South contributed in other ways. A letter from the Office of the Greenville and Columbia Railroad Company reveals that the board “passed a resolution that all corn and supplies donated for the poor be passed over our road free of charge.” Further correspondence with other rail lines suggests that commission was permitted to ship on southern rail lines for free or at reduced rates.⁴⁰ While the South may not have had actual cash to contribute they could and did contribute what materials and resources were on hand. Southern funds may also have been diverted through organizations such as the Southwestern Relief Commission based in Louisville, Kentucky, with whom the SFRC worked cooperatively.⁴¹ The SFRC even received a few international donations, including \$259.11 (after conversion) from William L. King of Marseilles, France and a \$90

³⁹ Southern Famine Relief Commission Records, Record Books, Reel 3.

⁴⁰ Southern Famine Relief Commission Records, Office of the Greenville and Columbia Railroad Company to Edward Bright, February 18, 1867, Reel 1. See also Office of the Seaboard and Roanoke Railroad Company to Edward Bright, February 18, 1867, Reel 1.; Western Atlantic RR to SFRC, March 30, 1867, Reel 1.

⁴¹ Southern Famine Relief Commission Records, Southwestern Relief Commission to Edward Bright, April 1, 1867, Reel 1.

donation from the Panama Relief Commission.⁴² While these limited donations suggest they may have come from American ex-patriots or officials stationed overseas, the fact that the famine was known internationally suggest its severity and the extent to which it was acknowledged at the time.

The subscription books tell yet another story concerning public involvement. All the donations over \$1,000 dollars came from either companies or organizations. The top three of \$5,000 each were from business interests – AJ Stewart & Co., Brown Bros. & Co., and the NY Stock Exchange. Of the remaining six, four came from relief organizations in Boston, Poughkeepsie, Troy, and Providence. The remaining two came from Halcott and Campbell, which appears to be a business of some sort, and the New York Gold Exchange.⁴³ While the majority of these interests were based in New York City, several others are represented as well, revealing that the SFRC attracted attention and large donations from several major cities, supporting the idea that this was not a simple New York charity but a larger organization more national in character. Why so many companies were donating to the Commission is unknown. The subscription books do not include information on whether donations were solicited or unsolicited, or why the donor was making said donation, but help from business was not limited to these subscriptions. Companies frequently publicized that the donation of part of a day's or month's sales would be given to relief of the southern famine (though not necessarily through the SFRC), and many others made their services available to the Commission at no charge, including the

⁴² The other international donations came from England, Ireland, and an additional donation from France. Southern Famine Relief Commission Records, Record Books, Reel 3.

⁴³ Southern Famine Relief Commission Records, Subscription Books, Reel 4.

Adams Express Company, the American Telegraph Company, and Western Union Telegraph Company along with “The Express, Navigation, Railroad and Stage and Telegraph companies” on the west coast.⁴⁴ Companies may have been contributing as a matter of public relations or to help facilitate the development of the Southern economy.

While pages and pages of single line account entries seems an odd place to look for the reconciliation of a nation, the record books of the SFRC reveal that helping the southern people during the famine did indeed prove to be a unifying force, bringing together people from all walks of life, from all over the country for one overarching purpose, the preservation of life. The line entries for contributions reveal the diversity of people contributing; besides the typical names of individuals and organizations the treasurer also recorded descriptive accounts: “Radical Republican, A Friend of the Suffering in the South, Sympathy, Officers of West Point Military Academy, A member of the 7th regiment, A Northern Sympathizer, Soldiers Aid So., A Sympathizer in Suffering G—, Officers and Crew of US “Powhatan” Callas, Peru.” As early as 1867 former Union soldiers were donating money to help those in need in the South. Northerners typically characterized as virtually opposed to the South were assisting in this relief effort. The southern famine may be the forgotten famine and the Southern Famine Relief Commission relegated to a rarely cited footnote, but a closer look at the records reveals that the famine and the Commission had a national impact.

⁴⁴ Southern Famine Relief Commission Records, News clippings, *Herald* April 8, 1867; March 9, 1867; *Final Proceedings*, 4.

In November 1867 the SFRC published *Final Proceedings and General Report of the Southern Relief Commission*; although the SFRC would continue to operate for a few more months they felt they had done all that was possible. In their final report the contributions of this agency and others are tallied, counted in bushels of corn, lives sustained and dollars spent. The totals are impressive for an organization that was in operation for such a short time – 160,316 bushels sent preserving 600,000 lives for four months, along with \$12,000 in cash.⁴⁵ In the process they made 600,000 southerners aware that they considered them fellow countrymen, part of a nation to no longer be viewed north and south but east to west. Yet for all the hard work, and lives saved the commission did not see this as enough; they felt the need to call for more aid to the South and believed that contributions would have been higher if the war relief, relief of widows and children of veterans and relief of wounded veterans had not secured the majority of available funds.⁴⁶ The Southern Famine Relief Commission goes unnoticed when discussions of Reconstruction take place, yet immediately after the war it was the most important civilian run relief effort in the South, and made clear headway towards facilitating reconciliation, regardless of outside influences.⁴⁷ It is imperative that further research on the Southern Famine Relief Commission be conducted in conjunction with the southern famine. Without such research nineteenth century American history is missing a vital link between the Civil War and Reconstruction.

⁴⁵ *Final Proceedings*, 13.

⁴⁶ *Final Proceedings*, 15, 18-19.

⁴⁷ Repeated requests for aid from Washington D.C. were denied to the SFRC including grain sacks for the corn, and a faster ship for the delivery of corn after Congress had approved the Commissions use of ships. See Southern Famine Relief Commission Records, Newspaper Clippings, *Times* March 23, 1867, Reel 4.; Western Union Telegraph Company Washington D.C. to New York City, 1867, Reel 4.

Appendix

Receipts for donations to the Southern Famine Relief Commission

Location	# of entries	% of identifiable entries
California *	3	0.49
Connecticut	48	7.88
Delaware	1	0.16
Illinois	9	1.47
Iowa	6	0.98
Kansas	1	0.16
Maryland	2	0.32
Massachusetts	29	4.76
Michigan	23	3.77
Minnesota	10	1.64
Missouri	6	0.98
New Hampshire	1	0.16
New Jersey	110	18.06
New York	258	42.36
Nevada	1	0.16
Ohio	23	3.77
Pennsylvania	45	7.38
Rhode Island	8	1.31
Vermont	9	1.47
West Virginia	1	0.16
Wisconsin	8	1.31
International	7	1.14

Total of entries identified by location: 609

Total number of entries: 915

Identified as percentage of total entries: 66.55%

*All donations for California are related to the San Francisco Relief Commission.

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