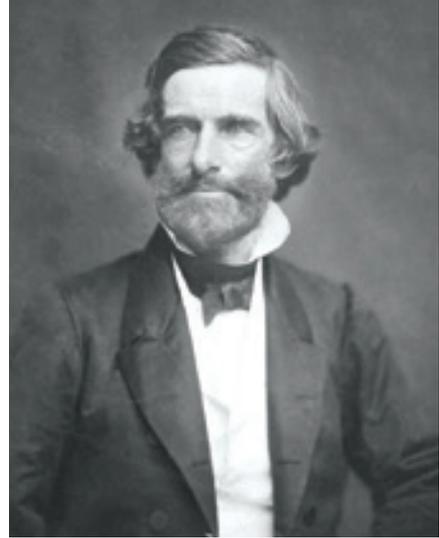


The American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, 19th-Century Racial Pseudoscience, and the False Assessment of Black America, 1863–1864

Jeff Strickland

In March 1863, Congress created the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission (AFIC) to investigate the socioeconomic prospects for emancipated slaves and to make recommendations for their transition from slavery to freedom, and it selected three white male abolitionists as its commissioners. That Samuel Gridley Howe, Robert Dale Owen, and James McKaye were committed to emancipation there can be little doubt. Like millions of white and black Americans, they viewed slavery as a great moral wrong contradictory to the egalitarian principles of free labor, free soil, and free men. But similar to many abolitionists, Howe, Owen, and McKaye adhered to prevailing 19th-century racial pseudoscientific views that asserted the superiority of the white race over the black race and the negative consequences of racial amalgamation.



Samuel Gridley Howe, a prominent abolitionist, served on the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission during the Civil War.

The AFIC commissioners thought whites were better fit to survive than pure blacks, who, in turn, were better fit to survive than mulattos—a major trope in early Social Darwinist thought. The AFIC relied partially on survey research that included biased questions based upon racial pseudoscience. Although many of the respondents affirmed the AFIC's beliefs about African Americans, many of those surveyed refuted any inherent biological and intellectual differences between white and black Americans. Simultaneously, the survey responses indicated that mulattos and blacks

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suffered from negative health effects of living on the margins of northern society, particularly high rates of tuberculosis and infant mortality. The AFIC not only chose to ignore the completed surveys that refuted biological differences between whites and people of color, but also failed to pay proper attention to the higher incidence of tuberculosis and infant mortality among African Americans in the North.

In the main, the commissioners did not accept African Americans as their equals, and they did not think them capable of successfully competing with white Americans. In its preliminary and final reports in June 1863 and May 1864, the AFIC emphasized self-sufficiency for African Americans in their transition from slavery to freedom rather than government intervention because it might create dependency.¹ Although the AFIC held that African Americans were biologically inferior to whites, it promoted their independence and likelihood of survival as freedmen and freedwomen. In pursuing that line of thinking, the AFIC failed to adequately address the critical need for both immediate and long-term government aid on behalf of the freedmen, especially considering the accumulated survey data on the state of black health. The AFIC's preliminary and final reports had profound influence on Reconstruction policies, and explain, in part, the short tenure of the Freedmen's Bureau.

Historians have largely ignored the history of the AFIC, and although a significant amount of archival material exists, no organizational history of the commission has been written. In an often-cited article, historian John G. Sproat called the AFIC's recommendations the "blueprint for Reconstruction." Recently, historians have revisited the AFIC, paying attention to the commission's interviews with freedmen and others, the published reports, and organizational papers. In *Troubled Refuge*, historian Chandra Manning spent a considerable amount of time on these records, primarily with a view to the African American perspective of emancipation during the Civil War. Manning demonstrated the horrendous living conditions that African Americans faced during and after the war.²

¹ John G. Sproat, "Blueprint for Radical Reconstruction," *The Journal of Southern History* 23, 1 (1957): 36.

² Works that touch on the AFIC include Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2016), 307; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York, 1988), 68–69; Harold Schwartz, *Samuel Gridley Howe, Social Reformer, 1801–1876* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956); Ira Berlin, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867: Selected from the Holdings of the National Archives of the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland, *Families & Freedom: A Documentary History of African American Kinship in the Civil War* (New York: New Press, 1997); Ira Berlin, Joseph Patrick Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Freedom's Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 100–2; and John W. Blassingame, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Louisiana State University Press, 1977).

Several historians have addressed the connection between 19th-century pseudoscience and the AFIC. In particular, George Frederickson and James McPherson discussed the correspondence between Louis Agassiz and Samuel Gridley Howe as evidence that Howe held racist beliefs.³ This author is most interested in the work of Matthew Furrow, which focuses on the racial ideology of Samuel Gridley Howe and his report on the black population in Canada West. Most importantly, Furrow argued that Howe relied heavily on pseudoscientific thought that shaped his conclusions that “were undermined by the very evidence Howe so carefully collected in Canada West.”⁴ I contend, in addition, that the AFIC ignored a wealth of contradictory evidence in making its final recommendations in its reports to Congress, particularly evidence that challenged contemporary notions of racial inequality and the public health status of black Northerners.

In this article, I argue that the AFIC commissioners ignored compelling evidence that contradicted their pseudoscientific beliefs about African Americans, as well as findings from numerous surveys that discussed the health and contributions of Northern blacks. In particular, I concentrate on AFIC surveys completed by Northern officials concerning blacks and mulattos living in their communities. The majority of the respondents portrayed blacks and mulattos as valued members of their respective communities. Although many respondents indicated that Northern African Americans suffered primarily from tuberculosis, they believed that black and mulatto populations were generally viable and had increased naturally over time. The AFIC ignored this evidence and reported that African Americans, mainly mulattos, suffered from infertility and disease, and that black Southerners were healthier on average than black Northerners. In reality, thriving African American families and communities in the North served as evidence that free blacks, including emancipated slaves could succeed there. The surveys revealed that African Americans worked hard and made valuable contributions to the communities in which they lived. Yet the AFIC feared what many white Northerners had feared for several decades—that four million emancipated slaves would proffer unprecedented labor competition with whites throughout the United States, including the North. The best way to prevent that scenario from

³ James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), 134–53; George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: the Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 159–64.

⁴ Matthew Furrow, “Samuel Gridley Howe, the Black Population of Canada West, and the Racial Ideology of the ‘Blueprint for Radical Reconstruction,’” *Journal of American History* 97, 2 (2010): 346.

transpiring was to provide minimal government support and discourage black migration to the North.

The commissioners' disregard of demographic evidence and the responses in their surveys show that they allowed their racial and social biases to influence their conclusions. Those biases ultimately prejudiced the recommendations in their official reports that urged promoting independence and self-reliance for freedpeople in the South. Their recommendations influenced subsequent federal government priorities and policies for providing relief and assistance to freedpeople in the postwar years—assistance that did not account for the heightened violence and resistance to black emancipation and full citizenship.

Racial Pseudoscience

Abolitionists attacked the concept of racial inequality in two ways—by demonstrating “the essential unity and equality of the races” and showing that the environmental conditions of slavery had degraded blacks in the South.⁵ “Many abolitionists, while arguing vigorously for the inherent equality of African Americans, nevertheless believed in racial *differences*,” James McPherson wrote.⁶ Many of them adhered to the pseudoscience of race that emphasized biological differences and biological inferiority. McPherson determined that while certain abolitionists constituted the “liberal vanguard” of their era, they were racist by contemporary standards.⁷ Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, and many other black intellectuals denounced scientific racism.⁸ Undoubtedly, antiracist black intellectuals influenced white abolitionists in New England, but white New Englanders considered black intellectuals exceptional and unrepresentative of black Southerners, free and slave. Instead, racial science held sway.

Physicians Josiah C. Nott, Samuel Cartwright, and Louis Agassiz were strong advocates of the racial differences that abolitionists often referenced.⁹ Louis Agassiz was the foremost natural scientist in the American School of anthropology.

⁵ McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality*, 136.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁸ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 312.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 309. See Reginald Horsman, *Josiah Nott of Mobile: Southerner, Physician, and Racial Theorist* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); James Denny Guillory, “The Pro-Slavery Arguments of Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright,” *Louisiana History* 9 (1968): 209–27; Edward Lurie, *Louis Agassiz, a Life in Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

He served as a professor and president at Harvard University, and he befriended several abolitionists, including Howe. Howe and Agassiz corresponded several times during the Civil War. Historian George Frederickson revealed that Howe “was ready to allow science to answer the empirical questions because he believed that whatever the future might hold for the black man, such determinations would not obviate the moral imperative to accord him fair treatment.”¹⁰ Howe had come to believe in “natural laws” holding that black Americans could not compete with whites and would die out.¹¹ Frederickson concluded: “With Howe the racial thinking of an advanced and liberal segment of Northern white opinion received its fullest expression. The limitations of such ‘egalitarianism’ were painfully obvious. Howe was an enemy of slavery and a proponent of legal equality for blacks, but he regarded intermarriage as disastrous, without apparently realizing that such a judgement legitimized a white prejudice that acted as a fundamental barrier to meaningful equality.” “Furthermore, like so many other whites who stood with him against slavery, he was unable to visualize a permanent future for Negroes in America,” Frederickson added. “His ideal America was all white; he was quite willing to see the Negroes diminish and even disappear after they has served their purpose in Reconstruction.”¹²

In early August 1863, Howe asked Agassiz to answer several questions about the prospects for emancipated slaves in the United States. Howe included a copy of the survey that he had distributed throughout the country.¹³ In his initial response, Agassiz refrained from answering the questions outright. Instead, he outlined his racist science, referencing the theory of the Unity of Mankind that “assumed that the different races have become what they are in consequence of their settlement in different parts of the world.”¹⁴ Agassiz believed the climate of the southern United States was “particularly favorable to the maintenance and multiplication of the negro race.” Next, Agassiz warned that sexual relations between whites and blacks produced “half-breed” mulattos who were sterile or less productive, and he considered mulattos “a sin against nature as incest in a civilized community is a sin against purity of character.” Agassiz concluded that the black population in warmer southern states would attract the black Northerners, while “the more

¹⁰ Frederickson, *The Black Image*, 160.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹² *Ibid.*, 164.

¹³ Samuel Gridley Howe, Aug. 3, 1863, Agassiz Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University (HL).

¹⁴ Louis Agassiz to Samuel Gridley Howe, Aug. 9, 1863, Agassiz Papers, HL.

weak and lighter” African American population that remained in the North would “die out.”¹⁵

In a subsequent letter, Agassiz affirmed his position regarding mulattos and offered policy recommendations for emancipation. Agassiz “insist[ed] upon the fact, that the population arising from the amalgamation of two races is always degenerative, that it loses the excellences of both primitive stocks, to retain the vices or defects of both, and never to enjoy the physical vigor of either.” He considered them “incapable of living on a footing of social equality with the whites, in one and the same community, without becoming an element of social disorder.” Agassiz warned Howe to “beware of granting too much to the negro race in the beginning, lest it becomes necessary by force to deprive them of by force some of the privileges which they may use to their own detriment and their own injury.” Agassiz suggested legislation for mulattos that would “accelerate their disappearance from the Northern States.”¹⁶ Agassiz concluded, “I am afraid these views will not be acceptable to a majority of those who, without any real knowledge of the negro race, and deriving all their information from our mixed colored population, have proclaimed the blacks as perfectly equal to the whites in every respect, and entitled to all the social privileges and political rights which we ourselves have conquered by hard struggles in the long battle for freedom.”¹⁷

In his third letter to Howe, Agassiz finally offered brief answers to the original questions. Howe inquired as to whether the “African race will be a persistent race in this country or will it be absorbed, diluted and finally effaced by the white race?” Agassiz answered, “I believe it will continue in the Southern States and I hope it may gradually die out at the North where it has only an artificial foothold, being chiefly represented by half-breeds who do not constitute a race by themselves.” Howe asked if “the general practical amalgamation fostered by slavery” would “become more general after its abolition?” Agassiz answered that emancipation would “tend to diminish the unnatural amalgamation, and lessen everywhere the number of those unfortunate half-breeds, deficient in manliness and feminine virtue, and left to be the ministers to the best of other races.” He indicated that the African American population in the North did not increase without migrants from the South.¹⁸ Agassiz predicted wherever a black majority existed in the South,

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Agassiz to Howe, Aug. 10, 1863, Agassiz Papers, HL.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Agassiz to Howe, Aug. 11, 1863, Agassiz Papers, HL.

freed African Americans would organize their own states. In a final letter, Agassiz recommended a federal policy that would keep the South under the control of whites “without wronging the blacks.”¹⁹

In his letters to Agassiz, Howe indicated that he tended to agree with his racial pseudoscience. In response to the first two letters from Agassiz, Howe wrote that “Slavery has acted as a disturbing force in the development of our national character, and produced monstrous deformities of a bodily as well as moral nature; for it has impaired the purity and lowered the quality of the national blood. . . . It has fostered and multiplied a vigorous black race, and engendered a feeble mulatto breed.” Howe was fixated on the notion that slavery had led free blacks to see refuge in the North, defying natural “thermal laws” that dictated they live in warmer climates. Emancipation would return the natural laws, and blacks and mulattoes would “disappear from the Northern and Middle States, if not from the Continent, before the more vigorous and prolific white race.”²⁰

The American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission

On March 16, 1863, Secretary of War Edward Stanton commissioned the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission and appointed three abolitionists, Robert Dale Owen, James McKaye, and Howe, to study the social and economic condition of African Americans throughout the United States and recommend ways to assist newly emancipated blacks in their transition from slavery to freedom in the long term, as well as to suggest ways freed slaves could support the federal government's war effort in the short term.²¹ Stanton selected antislavery men for the AFIC who were sympathetic to the problems associated with the transition from slavery to freedom. Congress would rely on their recommendations in establishing a reconstruction program in the South.²²

Stanton had directed the men “to prepare their own instructions, to be submitted for his approval.” The AFIC had three objectives. First, the commission would enquire about the number, condition, treatment, and capabilities of slaves actually free and over time. The commission would make recommendations about their

¹⁹ Agassiz to Howe, Aug. 15, 1863, Agassiz Papers, HL.

²⁰ Howe to Agassiz, Aug. 18, 1863, Agassiz Papers, HL.

²¹ *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Wash., DC, 1899), Series III, vol. III, 73.

²² Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), 209.

employment and treatment. Second, the commission would enquire about the number, condition, and disposition of those in slavery who can be induced to come out and join the Union cause. The commission would make recommendations as how best to promote that goal. Finally, the commission would enquire about the likely status of the black population at the successful close of the war. The commission would make recommendations to achieve the freedmen's goals with the least social disturbance.²³



Escaped slaves crossing over to Union lines at Newbern, NC, February 1863. Freedpeoples' urgent needs prompted congressional formation of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission in March 1863.

In April 1863, the AFIC opened an office on Second Avenue and East Ninth Street in New York City. The men agreed to divide up the work of preparing a preliminary report, each to investigate a different area in the South.²⁴ In June 1863, Howe inspected the military areas in Virginia, where he realized the problem was more complex than he had thought. Fleeing ex-slaves had sought the protection of Union forces, and they depended upon them for food, clothing, and shelter. The army exploited their labor, hiring the freedmen at low wages that were rarely paid.²⁵ In mid-June, McKaye visited Port Royal, South Carolina, where he interviewed teachers at Beaufort about their experiences with the freedmen. McKaye was

²³ Robert Dale Owen and James McKaye. Letter to S.G. (Samuel Gridley) Howe, Wash., DC, Mar. 19, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL.

²⁴ Samuel Gridley Howe to Charles Sumner, Apr. 26, 1863, Howe Papers, HL.

²⁵ Howe to Sumner, June 11, 1863, Howe Papers, HL.

especially interested in their performance as soldiers. Col. Thomas Higginson, commander of the First Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers, testified they made good soldiers. Gen. Rufus Saxton, commander of the District of Beaufort, Department of the South, indicated that the freedmen wanted to remain on the South Carolina Sea Islands, a belief that could alleviate northern anxieties about blacks migrating to the North.²⁶

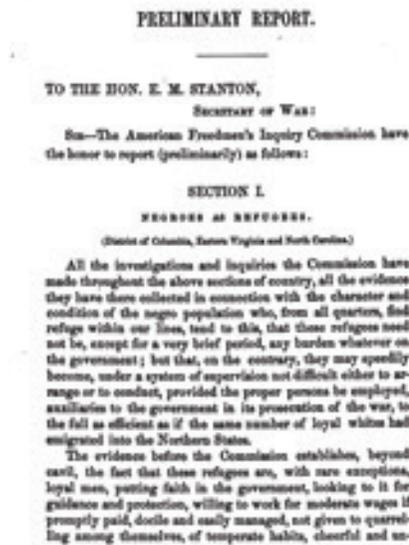
On June 30, the AFIC published the preliminary report in which the commissioners proposed that the federal government create a Bureau of Emancipation within the War Department.²⁷ In the report, the commissioners determined that African American refugees of the war would not be a “burden on the Government.” Instead, they “may become auxiliaries in the prosecution of the war to the full as efficient as the same number of loyal white emigrants into the Northern States.” The commissioners argued, “The evidence shows that these refugees are, with rare exceptions, loyal, faithful, able and willing to work for moderate wages, if promptly paid, docile, little given to quarreling cheerful, and uncomplaining.”²⁸ The report began with a section on African Americans as refugees. Next, it dealt with freedmen as military laborers. A section on freedmen as soldiers followed. The report concluded with recommendations for an organization that would assist the freedmen in the transition from slavery to freedom. The commission concluded “that the African race, as found among us, lacks no essential aptitude for civilization.” The commissioners added: “there is little reason to doubt that he will become a useful member to the great industrial family of nations. Once released from the disabilities of bondage, he will somewhere find, and will maintain, his own appropriate social position.”²⁹ Perhaps most importantly, the report attributed the following observations to General Saxton: “There is no disposition in these people to go North . . . The local attachments of the negro are eminently strong, and the southern climate suits him far better than ours. If slavery be reestablished in the insurrectionary States, the North will indeed be flooded with fugitives fleeing from bondage, and the fears of competition in labor sought to be

²⁶ Samuel Gridley Howe, Robert Dale Owen, and James McKaye, “Supplementary Report to the Secretary of War,” *Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General (Main Series), 1861–1870*, (National Archives Microfilm Publication M666), roll 199, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1762–1984, Record Group (RG) 94; Richard William Leopold, *Robert Dale Owen: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940), 238; *New York Times*, June 18, 1863.

²⁷ Leopold, *Robert Dale Owen*, 239.

²⁸ United States, *Report of the Secretary of War, Communication, in Compliance with a Resolution of the Senate of the 26th of May, a Copy of the Preliminary Report and Also of the Final Report of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission* (Wash., DC: Government Printing Office [GPO], 1864), 2.

²⁹ *Preliminary Report*, 21; *The Liberator*, Aug. 14, 1863; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Aug. 15, 1963.



The opening page of the AFIC's preliminary report to Secretary of War Stanton, June 30, 1863

excited in the minds of Northern workingmen will then have some plausible foundation. But if emancipation be carried out, the stream of negro emigration will be from the North to the South, not from the South to the Northern States."³⁰

Howe spent the rest of the summer in New York conducting research on African Americans and sending out long-form surveys to key posts in the South.³¹ Howe prepared a second, shorter survey, which he sent to clergymen, physicians, and community leaders in Northern cities.

The Surveys

The AFIC investigative technique marked an important moment because it focused on African Americans, both slave and free, living in the entire United States. The commissioners surveyed and interviewed physicians, politicians, officials, and community leaders throughout the North, South, and West—collecting facts that would assist them in making recommendations to Congress.³² With one exception, white males responded to the surveys, and their answers reflected the black image in the white mind, helping to shape the preliminary and final reports released in the summer of 1863 and spring of 1864, respectively. Importantly, during the summer of 1863, the AFIC commissioners conducted interviews in the South, including interviews with African Americans, many of them former slaves. Thus, black Southerners influenced the AFIC, and the commissioners included their testimony in the final report.

³⁰ *Preliminary Report*, 13.

³¹ Leopold, *Robert Dale Owen*, 360–61.

³² Oz Frankel, "The Predicament of Racial Knowledge: Government Studies of the Freedmen during the U.S. Civil War," *Social Research* 70 (Spring 2003): 45–82. Frankel focuses on the social science research methodology of the AFIC. He concludes: "The transient quality of the field of inquiry—the impracticality of a fixed, exhaustive overview of slavery's aftermath—prompted the commissioners to focus on discrete 'case studies,' whether at home or abroad." The surveys sent south tended to end up in contraband camps, and the responses were highly critical of African Americans. The AFIC also tended to send the long-form surveys to southern addresses. The majority of the short form surveys came from northern addresses.

At mid-19th century, Massachusetts physicians, mathematicians, and scientists recognized the importance of accumulating accurate data.³³ The U.S. Sanitary Commission, a private philanthropic organization, investigated conditions in U.S. military camps throughout the theater of war. In 1862, the Emancipation League, a committee upon which Howe served with four other abolitionists, began a campaign to persuade the federal government to create an emancipation bureau. In September, Howe went to Washington and met with Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase and others about the possibility of a freedmen's bureau, and Chase seemed amenable to the idea. The Emancipation League sought facts to support the need for a bureau, and in December, it designed a survey and sent it to superintendents and supervisors of freedmen throughout the Union-occupied South. The Emancipation League acquired data from a variety of Union-held positions in the South, and its members published *Facts Concerning the Freedmen: Their Capacity and Their Destiny*.³⁴

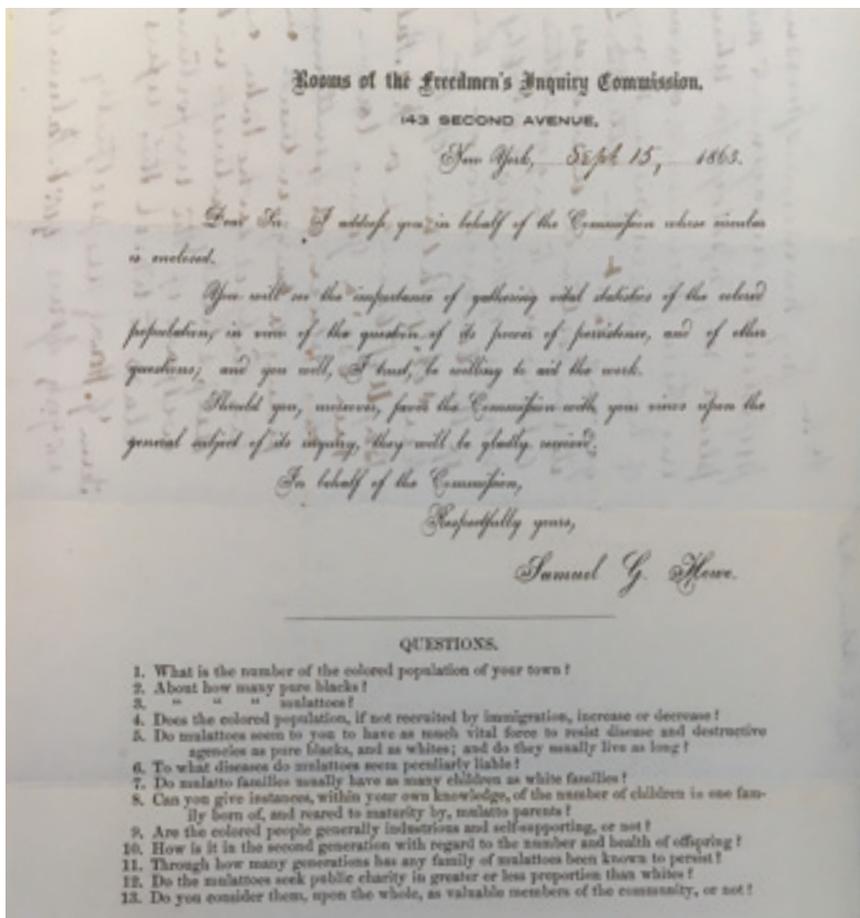
As a member of the AFIC, Howe designed two surveys to gather information about African Americans. The first was a 13-question survey that he distributed to physicians and public health officials throughout the United States. Physicians returned surveys from New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Vermont, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, Delaware, Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, Mississippi, and North Carolina. The questions focused on vital statistics, including population, disease, mortality, birth rate, and family structure, as well as the work ethic of African Americans in cities with free black populations. The AFIC asked questions that reflected the Emancipation League's survey:

1. What is the number of the colored population of your town?
2. About how many pure blacks?
3. About how many mulattos?
4. Does the colored population, if not recruited by immigration, increase or decrease?
5. Do mulattos seem to you to have as much vital force to resist disease and destructive agencies as pure blacks, and as whites; and do they usually live as long?
6. To what diseases do mulattos seem peculiarly liable?

³³ Barbara Gutmann Rosenkrantz, *Public Health and the State: Changing Views in Massachusetts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 21–23.

³⁴ Emancipation League, *Facts Concerning the Freedmen: Their Capacity and Their Destiny* (Boston: Press of Commercial Printing House, 1863).

7. Do mulatto families usually have as many children as white families?
8. Can you give instances, within your own knowledge, of the number of children in one family born of, and reared to maturity by, mulatto parents?
9. Are the colored people generally industrious and self-supporting, or not?
10. How is it in the second generation with regard to the number and health of offspring?
11. Through how many generations has any family of mulattos been known to persist?
12. Do the mulattos seek public charity in greater or less proportion than whites?
13. Do you consider them, upon the whole, as valuable members of the community, or not?



A letter from Samuel Gridley Howe containing the 13-question survey sent to physicians and public health officials throughout the United States.

Howe also designed a 42-question survey concerning former slaves and sent it to physicians who had been working with African American refugees. Completed long-form surveys arrived from New Bern, NC; St. Louis, MO; and Dayton OH.

We gain some insights into the results of the 13-question survey through an overview of responses to 5 questions from Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.

Twenty-one people answered question four. In responding to the question of whether the black population increased if not recruited by immigration, 10 (47.6 percent) answered in the affirmative, 10 replied that it decreased, and 1 replied that blacks decreased but mulattoes increased. Twenty people answered question five. Only 6 people claimed that mulattoes had the same vital force as blacks and whites. Eleven people responded that they did not have the same vital force as blacks and whites. Two people answered that mulattos had more vital force than blacks but not as much as whites. One person answered that when both parents were pure-blooded (a black and a white parent) the mulatto had more vital force but not when the parents were both mulattos. Twenty people answered the question about what diseases mulattos suffered from? Fifteen people indicated some form of tuberculosis, 4 people responded that there was no difference between mulattos and whites, and 1 person replied that they suffered from intermittent fevers, typhoid fevers, pneumonia, and smallpox. Fifteen people answered question seven. Nine people indicated that mulattoes had as many children as whites. Six people answered that mulattos did not have as many children as whites. Twenty respondents answered that black Americans were self-supporting and industrious, and only 2 thought the opposite. Finally, in responding to the question of whether they were valuable members of the community or not, 17 answered yes, and 4 answered no.³⁵

The AFIC had created a survey aimed at determining the degree of racial difference between mulattos and pure blacks, and many of the survey respondents suggested, without hard data, that mulattos suffered from epidemic disease more than

³⁵ Database compiled from 25 completed surveys. The author excluded 1 survey from a physician who no longer lived in the community he reported on. That author included the most racist opinions of any of the survey respondents, raising questions about his objectivity. Several people responded to the circular, but they did not answer the questions as asked. Instead, the respondents wrote generally about their respective black communities. In other instances, the respondents skipped questions or mentioned their lack of knowledge about a particular question. Hence, there are missing responses in all 13 questions.

pure blacks and whites. In addition, they often remarked that the mulatto and black population tended to decrease without immigration, a view that reflected prevailing racial science rather than scientific evidence. The respondents admitted that they did not have hard data on births and deaths to back up their statements.

Numerous respondents believed that African Americans were valuable members of their respective communities. William Wheeler reported on the African American community in Chelsea, MA, and he viewed them as industrious, self-supporting, and valuable members of the community.³⁶ William Anderson stated that black New Londoners were industrious and self-supporting and that they rarely applied for assistance and sought public charity less than whites. Anderson concluded that African Americans were “considered as valuable members of [the] community.”³⁷ Dr. Roswell Hawley believed that African Americans in Bristol, CT, were industrious and self-supporting.³⁸

Many respondents determined that African Americans, particularly mulattos, suffered from high rates of consumption.³⁹ African Americans did die from consumption more than any other cause, but it is not clear that they suffered more from the disease than whites.⁴⁰ The New London, CT, mortality schedule, for example, reveals that more African Americans died from consumption than from any other cause.⁴¹

Some respondents believed that newly emancipated slaves should remain in the southern United States. J. S. Barnes believed that black Americans in Southington, CT, were valuable members of the community. Barnes supported emancipation but believed that freed slaves should be colonized, not on foreign soil, but in South Carolina, Louisiana, and Texas. Barnes suggested appointing officers who would oversee the colonization efforts. “That they should be educated, disciplined

³⁶ William G. Wheeler, Letter to the Commission, Chelsea, Massachusetts, Sept. 22, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL.

³⁷ William Anderson, Letter to Dr. N. S. Perkins and the Commission, New London, CT, Oct. 1, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL.; 1860 Manuscript Federal Census. Ancestry Library Edition, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/> (accessed Nov. 22, 2017). William Glass, a 44-year-old mulatto wheelman from the Cape of Good Hope, lived with his wife and daughter, a dressmaker, and his mother-in-law.

³⁸ Dr. Roswell Hawley, Letter to the Commission, Bristol, CT, Sept. 28, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL.

³⁹ William G. Wheeler, Letter to the Commission, Chelsea, MA, Sept. 22, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL.

⁴⁰ 1860 Manuscript Mortality Schedule, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and New York. Ancestry Library Edition, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/> (accessed Nov. 22, 2017).

⁴¹ 1860 Manuscript Mortality Schedule, New London, CT. Ancestry Library Edition, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/> (accessed Nov. 22, 2017).

and trained to habits of industry and economy, as the people of New England are trained, physically, morally, religiously; as fast as circumstances will permit," he concluded. "In this way I see no good reason to doubt that in one or two generations, they would compare favorably with the greatness of our white population."⁴² These views reflected the conclusions of the AFIC.

On October 31, 1863, L. B. Coates indicated "that the institution of slavery was antagonistic to our form of Govt and if permitted unmolested to grow, would ultimately undermine and overthrow it. This sentiment I have defended and endeavoured [*sic*] to maintain from that to the present time." Coates thought that emancipated blacks should be colonized in Africa, but those who remained should settle in the South. Coates wrote, we "consider them upon the whole as valuable members of the community," industrious, temperate, "self supporting" and not persons who "seek public charity." Coates did not think mulattos less intelligent than whites, citing Frederick Douglass and Reverend Mr. Remus. He also mentioned Samuel Ringgold Ward, Henry Highland Garnet, James William Charles Pennington, and Martin Delany as examples of intelligent blacks.⁴³

In several instances, survey respondents felt compelled to share their views on racial equality. H. M. Knight did not believe that blacks were inferior to whites. In writing about blacks in Salisbury, CT, he recognized the role of racial discrimination in his town: "I do not believe the race really inferior to whites, if they may be blessed with the same advantages. But they are kept down. In our public schools the young black keeps pace with his fellows who are white, but as years increase they sympathy (psychical) of childhood is lost. The colored youth is kept aloof from his mates & must suffer in development."⁴⁴ Henry Bradley also noted the role of racial prejudice: "Quite as much so as other classes of their education and social rank most of them are poor and without much education but when they have success in getting a little piece of land on a credit or by gift they have uniformly added to the 'talent' so successful and have reared families and paid for their lands when they were purchased and have been regarded as good citizens in spite of the mean and wicked prejudice against color."⁴⁵

Other respondents made it clear that they did not believe inherent differences existed between mulattos and blacks. Wilson Jewell discussed the African American

⁴² J. S. Barnes, Letter to the Commission, Southington, CT, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL.

⁴³ L. B. Coates, Letter to the Commission, Batavia, NY, Oct 31, 1863. AFIC Papers, HL.

⁴⁴ H. M. Knight, Letter to the Commission, Salisbury, CT, Oct. 6, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL.

⁴⁵ Henry Bradley, Letter to the Commission, Penn Yan, Yates County, NY, Sept. 7, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL.

population in Philadelphia, PA: “The theory . . . in reference to the degeneration of mixed races as far as the negro is concerned does not accord with my observation.” Jewell concluded, “I look upon the coloured [*sic*] people of our city as valuable members of society as far as their opportunities, privileges, & advantages have enabled them to become so. Looked upon as they have been, as an inferior race it is wonderful, what respect they have gained in the community and how much influence they possess.” Jewell revealed the difficulty in obtaining accurate mortality data: “I could give you the mortality statistics of our coloured [*sic*] population as returned by our bills of mortality each year, but they are in my estimation so imperfect as not to be relied upon for scientific analyses.”⁴⁶

Survey respondents disagreed on whether the mulatto population declined or increased without immigration. Dr. Isaac G. Porter believed that the mulatto population in New London, CT, declined without immigration.⁴⁷ Thomas W. Blatchford determined that the mulatto population in Troy, NY, decreased over time.⁴⁸ Henry Bradley believed the black community in Penn Yan, Yates County, NY, had been increasing.⁴⁹ Francis George Shaw believed the African American population in Staten Island, NY, had declined without immigration.⁵⁰

Several officials indicated that African Americans were not valued members of their respective communities. One respondent believed that African Americans did not fare well in Seekonk, Massachusetts, and he did not consider them valuable members of the community.⁵¹ S.V.K. Bogert did not think African Americans on Staten Island, NY, were industrious “unless forced to work.” Bogert concluded, “I do not consider them as valuable members of any community, & imagine our country would be decidedly better off, if every black, was sent to Africa.”⁵²

⁴⁶ Wilson Jewell, Letter to the Commission, Philadelphia, PA, Oct. 26, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL. Jewell cited William A. Hammond, *A Treatise on Hygiene: With Special Reference to the Military Service* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1863).

⁴⁷ Dr. Isaac G. Porter, Letter to the Commission, New London, CT, Sept. 25, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL.

⁴⁸ Thomas W. Blatchford, Letters to the Commission, Troy, NY, Aug. 28, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL.

⁴⁹ Henry Bradley, Letter to the Commission, Penn Yan, Yates County, NY, Sept. 7, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL.

⁵⁰ F. G. Shaw, Letter to the Commission, Castleton, NY, Sept. 7, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL.

⁵¹ J. W. Aspinwall, Letter to the Commission, Seekonk, MA, Sept. 13, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL.

⁵² S.V.K. Bogert, Letter to the Commission, New Brighton, Staten Island, NY, Sept. 7, 1863, AFIC Papers, HL.

The Final Report

Owen wrote the final report between February and May 1864.⁵³ On May 15, 1864, the commission sent its final report to the secretary of war. It consisted of three parts: I. Slavery, II. Emancipation, and III. The Future of the African Race. Part I told the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade and slavery in North America. Part II dealt with the emancipation experience in the South since the war began. Part III discussed the need for short-term government aid, including a freedmen's bureau.

Part III of the final report contained a table on mortality in northern and southern cities. The commissioners concluded that “the mortality among blacks in the Northern cities is considerably greater than among whites, while in the Southern cities it averages about the same.” Mainly, African American births and deaths in southern cities were grossly underreported, leading to the miscalculation that white death rates were higher in southern cities than black death rates—the opposite of reality.⁵⁴

The AFIC determined that climate influenced black and mulatto mortality—and that African Americans experienced lower mortality rates in the South. The commissioners concluded that “the mixed race is inferior in physical power and in health to the pure race, black or white.” The survey respondents did not agree on this question, but the commissioners relied on the prevailing racial science. The commission failed to mention high rates of infant mortality and greater-than-average consumption deaths for blacks and mulattos. The commissioners admitted that they had only acquired data on black Americans collectively and not separate data for blacks and mulattos—and that they lacked “more exact and more extended statistical data.” Regardless, the commission felt comfortable with “limited” facts to back the belief that “the mulatto, considered in his animal nature, lacks the innervation and spring of the pure blacks and whites,” and that “the organic inferiority is shown in less power of resisting destructive agencies; in less fecundity and less longevity.”

⁵³ *Report of the Secretary of War, Communicating, In compliance with a resolution of the Senate of the 26th of May, a copy of the preliminary report, and also of the final report of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, Senate, 38th Congress, 1st Session, Ex. Doc. No. 53*, in United States. *Senate Executive Documents for the First Session of the Thirty-Eighth Congress of the United States of America. 1863–'64*. Wash., DC: GPO, 1864.

⁵⁴ *Report of the Secretary of War*, 105.

In determining the amount of aid necessary to assist the freedmen in the transition from slavery to freedom, the commission determined there was “as much danger in doing too much as in doing too little. The risk is serious that, under the guise of guardianship, slavery, in a modified form, may be practically restored.” “All aid given to these people should be regarded as a temporary necessity,” Owen wrote, “all supervision over them should be provisional only, and advisory in its character. The sooner they can learn to stand alone and to make their own unaided way, the better both for our race and for theirs.”⁵⁵

In the final paragraph of the report, the commissioners recommended the following: “Offer the freedmen temporary aid and counsel until they become a little accustomed to their new sphere of life; secure to them, by law, their just rights of person and property; relieve them, by a fair and equal administration of justice, from the depressing influence of disgraceful prejudice; above all, guard them against the virtual restoration of slavery in any form, under any pretext, and then let them take care of themselves. If we do this, the future of the African race in this country will be conducive to its prosperity and associated with its well-being. There will be nothing connected with it to excite regret or inspire apprehension.”⁵⁶



Freed slaves just after the Civil War. In 1863, the AFIC worked to document freedpeoples' conditions, needs, and abilities to sustain themselves.

⁵⁵ *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Dec. 17, 1864.

⁵⁶ *Report of the Secretary of War*, 110.

Stanton sent the report to the Senate on June 22, requesting approval to print the report for public distribution. After a lively debate, the Senate approved its printing 24 to 8, with 17 senators absent.⁵⁷ After more than a year of debate, Congress finally passed the Freedmen's Bureau Bill on March 3, 1865.

Conclusion

The three abolitionists who served as AFIC commissioners, especially Samuel Gridley Howe, subscribed to 19th-century racial pseudoscience, particularly the views of Louis Agassiz. The AFIC endeavored to collect accurate data about African Americans in order to assist freedmen in their transition from slavery to freedom. Mainly, the commissioners conducted field interviews in the South, where they met with military personnel, freedpeople, and former slaveowners. The commissioners also developed short- and long-form surveys, which reflected their racist beliefs, for distribution throughout the United States. The AFIC sent surveys to towns and cities throughout the North, and the majority of the respondents, physicians and leaders of those communities, indicated that African Americans were industrious and self-supporting, and that they were valued members of their communities. The respondents also suggested that African Americans, particularly mulattos, suffered from high rates of tuberculosis—as did whites in the North. This faulty understanding of exceptional suffering among Northern blacks reinforced the commissioners' conclusions that Southern blacks were healthier than Northern blacks, that they could and should remain in the South, and that they could survive with just enough aid and training to attain self-sufficiency. These views were reinforced by the commissioners' acceptance of the tenets of racial pseudoscience.

In addition, they did not pay enough attention to suggestions that African Americans needed government protection, that there would be an unprecedented extent of racial violence and suppression of civil liberties and legal rights. In the end, Congress followed the AFIC's recommendations to create a Freedmen's Bureau to provide temporary aid in the form of food, medicine, education, shelter, and employment assistance. The bureau lasted just seven years, leaving an impressive but imperfect legacy of aid to the freedmen. While it provided substantial social, medical, and economic aid, it could not adequately protect blacks against the new

⁵⁷ *The Congressional Globe*, Senate, 38th Cong., 1st Sess. (1864), 3285–3287.

repressive civil order of the postwar South.⁵⁸ If they had paid better attention to the survey evidence, they would have understood that freedpeople could succeed in the North, that Southern blacks faced great social obstacles requiring long-term assistance, and that the federal government should pursue public health policies aimed at assisting those same freedpeople.

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⁵⁸ Sproat, “Blueprint for Reconstruction,” 41.