

The Port Royal Experiment In the American Civil War - VFTE Companion Reader by Ilene Evans and Connie Rice

On November 7, 1861, Union forces consisting of approximately 60 ships and 20,000 men under the command of Union Navy Admiral Samuel F. DuPont and Army General Thomas W. Sherman attacked Confederate forces commanded by Brig. Gen. Thomas F. Drayton (a local plantation owner) who was defending Hilton Head Island at Fort Walker and Fort Beauregard. By 3:00 p.m., the Confederate forces had retreated from the forts. When Union troops landed on Hilton Head Island, they encountered no resistance and discovered that the island's white inhabitants had already fled to the mainland, leaving behind the people who had been held in bondage for generations. Over 10,000 blacks remained, eager for the refuge and protection the Federal military flag offered. The Port Royal Experiment began in November 1862 on Saint Helena Island, South Carolina, in Beaufort County.

The Port Royal Experiment was an effort to prepare newly freed people for full participation in post-Civil War society with educational and land ownership opportunities. The program was created during the American Civil War to establish freedmen and women in a successful community to work the land abandoned by plantation owners. A second component of the experiment was to recruit and train men of African descent for soldiers in the military campaigns and have them fight next to white soldiers on equal footing of pay and promotions. Northern abolitionists and their Anti-slavery organizations supported the freedmen and women in becoming self-sufficient. It was their declaration of war against slavery; and a dream of an integrated social and political Union comprised of people from both races and cultures. Their intent was to prove the superiority of free labor and to transplant Northern values and remodel southern civil and social society.

At the same time, anti-Catholic bigotry inspired Republicans to promote public education throughout the South during the 1870s. As a result, Port Royal became a model of what Reconstruction could have been. African Americans quickly demonstrated their ability to work the land efficiently and live independent of white control. With assigned daily tasks for growing cotton, the residents of Port Royal had extra time to cultivate their own crops, fish, and hunt. The sale of surplus crops provided the funds to acquire small amounts of property. Schools, open to all ages for reading and writing lessons, provided residents with the education they needed to make their community successful. Their achievements made at Port Royal between 1861 and 1865 proved that social, economic, and political equality was possible.

In 1863, General Ormsby M. Mitchel permitted African Americans to establish the town of Mitchelville on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. Built on the former Drayton Plantation, the town was close in proximity to the military camps. Mitchelville became the heart of a program known as "**The Port Royal Experiment.**" Mitchelville had neatly-arranged streets, one-quarter-acre lots, elected officials, a church, laws addressing such issues as community behavior and sanitation, taxes collections, and compulsory education law for children between the ages of six and fifteen, most likely the first such laws in the South.

This experiment was a major media event. Black family life and loyalty were on trial, as were Black soldiers and their manhood. There were two questions to be determined in the mind of the American Government: Will the people of African Descent work for a living? Will they fight for their freedom? The entire country continually scrutinized and assessed the "experiment." Newspaper journalists embedded with the quartermasters in charge of daily life and with troops during military action published reports in the weekly papers that altered public opinion and political policy throughout the war. Those who doubted the military success of Black troops in the field fighting alongside White troops were both surprised and impressed at the valor of the sable warriors. United in a common cause bigotry began to ease between the races – at least on the battlefield.

When the war ended in 1865, President Andrew Johnson ended the experiment and returned the land to its previous white owners, thereby ending the dream of a unified and egalitarian society.

