



**First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield**  
**429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330**  
***Creating Community, Welcoming All***

**MY TURN     The Recorder Greenfield MA**  
*By Carl Doerner*

**April 21, 2021**

Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's 47-day siege of Vicksburg, Mississippi, ended July 4, 1863. Many troops responsible for that Union victory were under the command of Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman. Fighting battles and destroying Atlanta along the way, this Sherman-led force did not reach and capture Savannah, Georgia, until Dec. 21, 1864. The pace of our Civil War was haltingly slow because, for the most part, the soldiers walked — in this case a distance of 670 miles in 17 months.

When my own 135th Infantry Regiment was transferred from Camp Rucker, Alabama to Ft. Benning, Georgia, in 1954, we walked the 120 miles. Carrying weapons and full field gear, we made camp each night along the way.

Of course, we weren't threatened by rebel snipers, but walking those red dirt roads was the only occasion in which an Army buddy who slept in the bunk next to mine could have left base with me. As his skin was dark, for us to step off base for any social reason would have put both our lives in danger. Following upon Sherman's march to the sea, there was a conversation between Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, leading to issue of an order. This order described an extensive piece of totally abandoned South Carolina farmland "reserved and set apart for the settlement of slaves now made free by the acts of war and by the proclamation of the President of the United States." A question, what does the Negro want? was based on interviews with nine ex-slave ministers in the North. Their answer was "land." The order stipulated 40 acres of tillable land, possession of which was protected by military authority until such time as title is obtained. Sherman promised to lend mules. His grant was the origin of promise to ex-slaves of 40 acres and a mule. By June 1865, 40,000 freedmen were settled on 400,000 acres of this farmland.

Lincoln, credited with freeing the slaves, had done so because he needed more soldiers: 179,000 served in the Union army. Lincoln had no idea how to resolve the fact that most whites regarded ex-slaves as less than human — the Constitution counting them as  $\frac{3}{4}$  persons.

Andrew Johnson was a Democrat from Tennessee. He had owned slaves, and was thought to have fathered the child of a slave. He was selected as Lincoln's 1864 vice president in an effort to restore national unity. Assuming the presidency at Lincoln's death, he interfered with Congressional Reconstruction efforts by serving the interests of the defeated Southern leaders. He blocked legislation, forcing Congress to override his veto of the 14th Amendment and Freedmen's Bureau legislation.

Then came a Republican congressional effort to remove Johnson from office based on acts of corruption. Their impeachment effort failed by one vote to achieve conviction in the Senate. Johnson reversed Sherman's order, giving the "40 acre" farms back to the previous plantation owners. The freedmen were driven off, and a hundred years passed before courageous people of color and their emergent leaders began, in 1965, to make a few important changes in how African Americans were treated.

Pacification of the South began with Army occupation, Republicans elected to office, ex-slaves voting, and elected to office. Mostly former slaves, eight served in Congress. To resolve an 1876 Electoral

College tie, Southerners allowed the Republican Rutherford Hayes to assume the presidency in exchange for ending Army occupation of the South.

The attitude of white supremacy, about which I have previously written, was baggage every immigrant carried from Europe to our shores. It was passed down to heirs. It dictated perception and behavior.

Periodic attacks on the Irish, Italians, Jews, Orientals, and Catholics have been part of this systemic hate. Laboring men wanted no rivals for jobs.

Settlers wanted no Native Americans in their path. They wanted cavalry to clear the way for ranching, farming, and mining. The basic tool preventing slave revolts and settling the West was the gun. A gun was as important as a plow in establishing white supremacist's claims.

The 13th Amendment barred slave labor — except in our prisons today. The 14th Amendment made former slaves citizens. Southern rules prevented Black men from voting. The 15th Amendment failed, as well, to provide. Congress did nothing to enforce these. Four thousand Black citizens have been lynched. By 1877, Reconstruction ended in the South. Racism existed by law in the South, by social acceptance in the North. These matter remain unsettled. Our Civil War rages on.

*Charlemont resident Carl Doerner is an author and historian currently at work on a re-examination of and challenge to the "American narrative."*