

Forging Freedom: Wartime Reconstruction

“The settlement was well-ordered, great, quiet, healthy and better regulated than [New Bern].”

-Horace James on James City, 1865

In New Bern and other areas controlled by Federal forces early in the war, Reconstruction began before 1865. Building on the efforts of Superintendent of the Poor Vincent Colyer, Horace James, superintendent of Negro affairs, established schools, provided clothing and food, and tried to ensure fair contracts between blacks and whites. James also laid out settlements for freed people, which were eventually consolidated into the Trent River Settlement, later named James City.

By March 1865, Congress took steps to provide nationally for freed people by creating the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, commonly called the Freedmen’s Bureau. This agency continued the work begun during the war, setting up schools and hospitals. Agents—usually white northerners—sought to negotiate fair labor contracts for the formerly enslaved people. One group of Craven County freedmen referred to the Bureau as “an indispensable necessity for [our] protection.”

Sidebar: James City

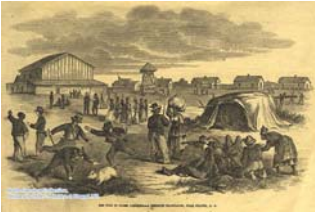
When African Americans began flooding into the Union lines in 1862, most had no place to reside. For many, the idea of freedom meant having a home of their own and land to cultivate. To combat vagrancy, Union officials assisted freed people in establishing settlements on land confiscated from white southerners.

By 1865, the settlements around New Bern had been consolidated and renamed James City. It contained nearly 800 houses and was home to more than 3,000 people. Two years later, the community supported twelve stores, five churches, five schools, and seven government buildings. Ninety percent of James City residents supported themselves without government assistance.

Larger political and social trends soon began to impact James City residents. The gradual closure of the Freedmen’s Bureau from 1867 to 1869 left families without government support. Also, the reclamation of the settlement’s land by the Evans family—the original landowners—proved problematic for residents. Many who were used to keeping the crops they produced found themselves in disadvantageous sharecropping relationships with landowners. Others refused to pay rent, believing they had improved the property and that it was given to them by the federal government. Many residents left James City. Those who stayed faced increased hardship when land changed owners in the 1880s and legal action to evict the tenants ensued. Despite adversity, residents did remain—many establishing a “New James City” on nearby land available for sale. Today, the community still survives, carrying a legacy of pride, strength, and endurance.



"The campaign in North Carolina--Headquarters of Vincent Collyer, Superintendent of the poor at Newberne--distribution of captured rebel soldiers' clothing to the contrabands," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, June 14, 1862, UNC Library, Chapel Hill, N.C, "Documenting the American South," <http://docsouth.unc.edu/>.



"The War in North Carolina—A Deserted Plantation, Near Craven, N.C.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, October 11, 1862, UNC Library, Chapel Hill, N.C, "Documenting the American South," <http://docsouth.unc.edu/>.



Trent River Settlement, *Harper's Weekly*, June 9, 1866, courtesy of www.harpersweekly.com