

Laura Matilda Towne: Liberty, Love and Laughter

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“Low –lying cotton-fields, where here and there a sentinel palmetto; roads arched by moss-clad oak boughs; stretches of unclaimed timber and undergrowth; wide-sweeping marshes reflecting the moods and colors of the sky; the salt breath of the sea, softened by its passage over many islands; such is St. Helena. The cabins stand lonely and apart, most of them white, some painted pinks and reds. Here a woman, a bright bandana wound turban-like about her head, looks from her door; yonder the patriarchal figure of a man toils over the ploughed field. It is a land of great distances in a small compass, of soft colors, of a people utterly dependent on the soil and weather, primitive in their faith and courage, long-abiding, and wonderfully patient. Gratitude comes easily to their lips. Thankfulness for what they have received still seems the keynote of their lives.” *Endnote*

Written in the very beginning of the “Letters and Diary of Laura Matilda Towne,” you can get a picture of the kind of landscape Laura Towne found herself in when she decided to leave Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, at 36 years of age and travel to St. Helena Island off the coast of South Carolina in 1862 to help the freed slaves. Her calling stemmed from the abolition movement prior to the Civil War, having heard many a sermon by her minister, William Henry Furness, of the First Unitarian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her arriving to St. Helena came shortly after the Union Navy surprised the cotton growers of the Sea Islands, South Carolina, in November of 1861, by capturing Port Royal Sound and Beaufort, between Charleston and Savannah. The picturesque description of the plantation owners’ slaves plowing the land is far from the reality when you read about “the day of the big gun-shoot” describing how “the Navy mounted a major assault against two Confederate forts that guarded the mouth of the Port Royal sound, quickly shelling them into submission. And on

the heels of the Union's naval success, federal troops landed and quickly established control of St. Helena island and other sea islands." *Endnote*

The plantation owners fled, leaving behind their homes and slaves. The now freed slaves were unprepared, uneducated and unskilled to begin a new life. Thus, the life of a woman abolitionist named Laura Matilda Towne from Philadelphia innervates with the lives of frightened, black men and women and children through the "Port Royal Experiment which was the first large scale government effort designed to assist newly freed blacks in making the difficult transition from slavery to freedom." *Endnote*

Until now, Yankees had lived a world away. Then quite suddenly, less than five months after the gun-shoot, they were all over the islands. From their faraway homes, most of all from Boston, came the missionaries, known as the "Gideon's Band", and almost overnight "the Northern colony moved in and took over St. Helena island. They brought as much confusion and distress as relief to the Negroes they were supposed to help and fortunately, it was the good that outlived the evil. Perhaps there was something of atonement in the dedicated services of those who gave most and for many years. In any case, they steered the course of St. Helena history for the next century and assured the people of that island a better life than most other freedmen would ever know." *Endnote*

As a Unitarian Universalist today, it's interesting to read the list of all the Unitarians, like herself, who were aboard the Oriental, with the same noble cause of The Port Royal Experiment. Miss Towne gives descriptions of each person with their name. I'll only highlight those she labeled as the Unitarians:

- John Orrell; Sandwich, Mass.—a small man—loud voice. Unitarian preacher.
- Richard S. Eded; Boston, Mass.—Mary May's nephew—very sick, rather deaf, good Unitarian preacher.
- Miss Harriet Ware; Milton, Mass. – Dr. Henry Ware's daughter.

Laura Towne was the only passenger from Philadelphia aboard the Oriental. She was the daughter of John Henry Towne. who had been well established both economically and socially as a "First Family" in the Boston vicinity for more than two hundred years. Following the death of his wife, John Towne had moved his family to Philadelphia to continue their education. Here, Laura had studied and worked as a protégé of Dr. Constantin Hering, a homeopath of some note. Her desire was to use her medical training in services on the Sea Islands. Although an heiress in her own right, well educated and gifted, surrounded by a large and loving family whom she cherished, Laura held such deep

concern for the work that her dedication to the welfare of freedmen kept her on the island to the end of her life. While on the Oriental she and those from Massachusetts were assigned to St. Helena island. Of all the people who initially signed on for this experiment on St. Helena island with the freed slaves, “only two—Miss Towne and her dearest friend, Ellen Murray, lived out their lives, and the 19th century, in service to the people of St. Helena island.” *Endnote*

What is interesting to me about Laura Towne and her relationship to the freed slaves on St. Helena island and with the founding of Penn School, is her faith while among the faith of the blacks who she worked, cared for, and lived with during her days around the Civil War. I’m wondering in what ways her liberal Unitarian faith manifested itself in her daily life through the writings of her personal letters to family and friends in Philadelphia and her personal diary reflections she wrote each day. But first, some highlights of her varied ways of leadership among the people who she grew to love.

It seems clear to me, in reading about Miss Towne, that the story of founding Penn School for the purpose of educating the freed slaves and their children, is interwoven with her liberal faith that called for liberty for all people. As a homeopath, Laura began visiting among the sick, when she first came to the island, dealing with devastating epidemics like yellow fever, cholera, and dysentery, where she vaccinated, applied medications and often through the night. Through her letter writing and diary she reveals her despair, loneliness, and exhaustion, as she was often the only hope the people had.

As a teacher, she and her partner, Ellen Murray, began teaching the freed slaves which proved to bring influence in their lives, but she also became a bridge between those representing the government and those the government was to serve. She would advise them of their rights, most notably their right to own land they had worked on all their lives. Miss Towne’s persistence made it possible for the St. Helena blacks to own 75 percent of the land in Beaufort County, which distinguished them from blacks elsewhere in the South. “The Confiscation Act of June 1862 seized abandoned properties and properties that were delinquent in their war taxes. Significant portions of these impounded properties were sold to blacks on St. Helena at reasonable rates.” *Endnote* Laura Towne was a revolutionary who broke several social barriers while on the island. She confronted the seemingly assigned social place of the African American by breaking patterns of subservience. This enabled them a sense of independence, responsibility, and leadership. Some blacks were given the opportunity to teach with Laura and Ellen. Miss Towne also broke the barrier of gender expectations of domesticity when she chose to live away from home and with another woman.

By way of the Port Royal Experiment many opportunities, like land ownership, for the freed slaves became available. Literacy became a reality, where no longer was it prohibited by law to learn to read and write. Penn School became the best known as “former slaves responded with enthusiasm, demonstrating a thirst for knowledge that deeply impressed their teachers. Both young and old attended school, creating a demand that far exceeded the school’s capacity.” *Endnote* And with the help of time, the abolitionists began to develop an appreciation for the African-American culture. Where, initially, they had gone to the islands to uplift the freed slaves, meaning teaching Euro-American values and culture, they were soon to recognize the richness of the African-American culture. Especially through their music which was expressed often and with profound difference from what Miss Towne and her fellow missionaries were used to. “The music’s distinction was its African-ness, it’s distinctive rhythmic structure, heavy reliance on call-and-response, and the communal nature of its compositions rooted in the musical traditions of West Africa.” *Endnote*

Writing letters to those she left in Philadelphia, Laura tells of the first experience with church among the blacks, she writes:

“The church was in the midst of splendid live-oak trees hanging with moss, and the services were impressive only because they were so unusual, especially the singing... Mr. Horton, who was one of our fellow passengers on the Oriental, a Baptist minister, preached a sermon upon true freedom, and I think the negroes liked it. We heard of one old negro who got up in meeting, when one of your superintendents was leading the services, and said, “The Yankees preach nothing but cotton, cotton.” The fact is that every man has thought it his duty to inculcate the necessity of continuing to work, and the negro can see plainly enough that the proceeds of the cotton will never get into black pockets—judging from past experience” *Endnote*

Throughout her letters and diary Towne speaks of freedom of the slaves and it’s importance on their being able to care for themselves. Herself, a Unitarian, knew well the importance of freedom, especially freedom of religion.

The belief in freedom for Laura and Ellen Murray was manifested primarily in the founding of Penn School. Teaching was their life-style from the beginning of days on St. Helena Island. In March of 1864, the Philadelphia Commission began efforts to secure a building for the Murray-Towne school, as they had been meeting in a church. Two small school houses were shipped and after a years time to put the buildings together they selected a site for the school “in the field opposite the church.” *Endnote* They named the school “Penn School”, as Miss Towne said, “for William Penn, that great lover of liberty. The school bell which had to be heard over five or six plantations, came six months later, on which Miss Towne inscribed the words, “Proclaim Liberty.” *Endnote*

Originally classes were held for the freed slaves at the Baptist church. Laura Towne attended church there as often as everyone since it was one of the only churches on the island. She describes many times what she saw while at church:

“It was a most picturesque sight to see the mules tied in the woods and the oddly dressed Negroes crowding in. Inside it was stranger still, the turbans or bare heads, the jetty faces, and uncouth forms were all wild.” *Endnote*

Her sense of openness to experiences that seemed foreign to her showed her belief in the diversity of humanity. Typically, she would hear Baptist sermons from a Baptist preacher but she would also find a meaning that she was comfortable with, for example, she writes:

“The preacher made an excellent sermon upon the text, “Hold fast to that liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free,” or something like that. He told them that liberty did not mean freedom to be idle, etc. But the sermon was an exhortation to preserve liberty, and was a good one...” *Endnote*

On other occasions of hearing sermons, there are some she objected to, she writes:

“I told the preacher I was much gratified by his sermon, but objected to two things—his qualifying their freedom rather too much, and his telling them that we had all come down to do them good, leaving homes and comfort for their sake. “I wanted to keep up their respect for these young men,” he answered. “I don’t know that we shall do it by self-praise,” I said—and he looked annoyed. “I have heard them told so, so often,” I said again, “that I am sure that is well drilled into their heads.” One thing the soldiers did, notwithstanding all their wronging of the slaves by taking their corn, and that is, they made them fully sure that they are free and they never again can be claimed by any master as property. Some of the superintendents threaten that they shall be re-enslaved if they do not succeed and work as freemen. But I think the Negroes know that it is only a threat, and despise the makers of it.” *Endnote*

Laura seems to have a keen sense of understanding of how the black freedmen are much smarter than the educated white people give them credit. Her own sense of freedom and authority to speak her mind, as a woman in the 1860’s, is impressive. Once again Miss Towne speaks of the importance of freedom and liberty as a way of life important to her and with those she lives and teaches. It is also related to her sense of call to St. Helena island, where here she describes it at a time when she was doing housekeeping more than anything else, she writes:

“I have a good deal of satisfaction too, in housekeeping, for comfort is coming out of chaos; so I did not come here for nothing. I can do, too, what I always wanted to come for specially, and that was to strengthen the anti-slavery element....” *Endnote*

Then there was another kind of church service experience Laura refers to in her diary and letters known as a “shout”:

“Last night I was at the “Praise House” for a little time and saw Miss Nelly reading to the good women. Afterwards we went to the “shout,” a savage, heathenish dance. Three men stood and sang, clapping and gesticulating. The others shuffled along on their heels, following one another in a circle and occasionally bend the knees in a kind of curtsy. They began slowly, a few going around and more gradually joining in, the song getting faster and faster, till at last only the most marked part of the refrain is sung and the shuffling, stamping, and clapping get furious. The floor shook so that it seemed dangerous. It swayed regularly to the time of the song. As they danced they, of course, got out of breath, and the singing was kept up principally by the three apart, but it was astonishing how long they continued and how soon after a rest they were ready to begin again....they kept up the “shout” till very late.”

Endnote

Once again her sense of openness, although somewhat opinionated, to new experiences translates as an educational experience with overtones of fascination with a group of people very different from herself and her own religious traditions.

It didn't seem to take Laura as much time, as it did other missionaries, to begin to appreciate the culture of the blacks, especially their music. She also could create an understanding or explanation of what she thought the message from the music might be. Early in her diary, April 1862, she writes:

“On Sunday I was much pleased with one of the hymns the negroes spontaneously set up, of which the refrain was—“No man can hinder me.” It was, I believe, saying that nothing could prevent access to Jesus.... Another song is, “The Bell done ring.” Another, “Bound to go.” Another, “Come to Jesus.” They sing the tune of “John Brown’s Body” to other words, and in church or out of it, whenever they begin one of these songs, they keep time with their feet and bodies. It sounded very strange in the church.” *Endnote*

She had an ability to connect her own Christian understandings to the intention of the native spiritual songs without much difficulty.

There was a time in the life of Laura Towne and the freedmen where Laura's integrity and faith was challenged under threatening and disillusioning circumstances. The Port Royal Experiment superintendents of the plantations and the teachers on St. Helena Island, of which Laura was one, waged a valiant battle to restore confidence and win cooperation of the disillusioned freedmen from never getting any wages for their labor of gathering in the rest of the cotton crop already produced by the owners. Cotton had always meant money for the masters to buy more slaves, but for the slaves themselves it meant only more work. A trust relationship was generated between the superintendents, the teachers and the freedmen because they let the people prepare the ground for cotton as well as for their own food crops. "General Hunter, in command of the newly created Department of the South, was obsessed with the idea of recruiting Negroes into the army, giving them a chance, as he felt, to prove themselves once and for all." *Endnote* He sent an order for "every able-bodied Negro man on St. Helena to be sent without explanation and under guard, to Hunter's headquarters at Hilton Head. Superintendents and teachers were not to mention the impending draft to the Negroes for fear they would all flee to the woods. The Negroes sensed some terrifying change in their fortune and feared that they were to be abandoned to their returning masters." *Endnote* Laura's diary, dated "Monday, May 12, 1862 The black day," tells her version of the day they came to get the freedmen and take them to Hilton Head to join one of General Hunter's two regiments of black troops. She describes how when she told another woman in her household all about it, she was "astonished at first then said, "Sister French's time is come." "What time?" I asked. "She said she wanted to weep and pray with the people, and the time has come to do it." *Endnote* So Laura describes how she and three other women:

"... had a quiet time in the Praise House... and I heard good old Marcus exhort, Dagus pray, Miss Nelly read, and then all sing. Marcus said he had often told the Negroes that they never knew what would befall them, and poor black folks could only wait and have faith; they couldn't do anything for themselves. But though this massa had laughed and asked him once whether he through Christ was going to take d—d black niggers into heaven, he felt sure of one thing, that they would be where Christ was, and even if that was in hell, it would be a heaven, for it did not matter what place they were in if they were only with Christ." Laura goes on to write, "They thanked us for going to pray with them, so feelingly; and I shook hands nearly all round when I came away, all showing gentle gratitude to us. I could not help crying when Marcus was speaking to think how soon the darkness was to close around them." *Endnote*

Her diary tells of how nothing was explained to the Negroes because by command they were not to speak of it. However, Laura was determined to go tell one woman that their masters were not coming back because Laura saw this as their fear. Soon they came to take the men to Hilton Head and Laura said to them:

“I hope you will all be back again in a few days with your free papers, but if your are needed, I hope you will stay and help to keep off the rebels.” She describes how the men sent for their caps and shoes and without a farewell to their wives were marched unprepared from the field to their uncertain fate. “It made my blood boil to see such arbitrary proceedings, and I ached to think of the wives, who began to collect in the little street, and stood looking towards their husbands and sons going away so suddenly without a word or look to them. I gave each Negro man a half-dollar and then they marched off. Some were crying bitterly, some looked angry and revengeful, but there was more grief than anything else. I assured them a little, I think, and told them we would not leave them in danger and fly without letting them know.”

Endnote

This description of what happened on that “black day” manifests Laura’s struggle with the knowledge she was privy to and her profoundly deep affection for the freedmen and their families. She even expresses her anger in writing towards General Hunter risking the danger of resistance on their part, and how entirely unprotected he left her and all the other women who she knew could not manage on their own the growing crop of cotton fields and corn field. With regret of it all Laura writes that “it is too late to retrace these steps, but the injustice need be carried no further. She continues:

“This tyranny carried dismay into this household, and we were in great indignation to think of the alarm and grief this would cause among the poor Negroes on this place. We have got to calling them our people and loving them really—not so much individually as the collective whole—the people and our people.” *Endnote*

After having been on the island a while, Laura writes about a particular minister who she describes as a “certain black or brown man who is certain to make his mark in the world.” She writes that he is very eloquent and ambitious and makes a “great stir in the department by his public speaking.” This minister actually lived near Laura and Ellen and his sister taught in their school. She writes:

“He often comes in of an evening, and the other day he found out to his intense horror that I was a Unitarian. But, though he says he expected better things of me, and various other things like that, he is really wonderfully liberal, and, as he will probably fall in with the right kind of people by reason of his eloquence and genius, he will one day perhaps be a Unitarian himself.” *Endnote*

One can grasp that Miss Towne was proud to be a Unitarian but also understood when others did not agree with her choice of religion.

There was a strong sense of family among Miss Towne and Ellen Murray and the blacks. However, there were some white folk who thought worshipping with people of the same color was more appropriate. But Laura and Ellen kept right on attending church with the native people of the island. Laura must have had a great sense of humor because in her diary and letters she would write down experiences she thought were funny, for example:

“We had such a funny time in church today. There was no white minister, and two elders preached and one prayed. The one who prayed—Uncle Jimmy—said that he asked the Lord to bless the brother “who had just preached to them from such a shallow judgment and untortmenting understanding.” Whether he played upon the ignorance of the others or was ignorant himself we are inclined to question. In conclusion, he told the Lord he was his unworthy brother.” *Endnote*

Laura lived the rest of her life on St. Helena island through droughts, diseases, hurricanes and plagues. She was a woman of strength, perseverance, and deep faith in her fellow human beings and in her faith as a Unitarian. Her calling to care for the freed slaves, she did magnificently through her medical training, her teaching, her advocacy, and her belief in the anti-slavery movement. Having lived among and with the people of St. Helena island for so many years, she gave her life to them because of her conviction of liberty. The last words of her diary, dated 1884, are describing a time when she was waiting at the train station for Ellen to come pick her up and take her back to the island, having just returned from traveling to Philadelphia. While sitting at the train station in Yemassee, South Carolina, she writes:

“The North Penn conductor, that old plague, came and talked to me a long time at Yemassee. He says the Reading has bought the Newtown, and is going to make a connection between Fern Rock and Bethaires which, will cut off nine miles of the distance to New York. He said the whole race of niggers ought to be swept away, and I told him my business was with that race and that they would never be swept away, so he was disgusted and went away, leaving me to read in peace.” *Endnote*

Laura Matilda Towne died in 1901.

“It must have been a picturesque sight when, on the morning after her death, a procession of several hundred men, women, and children took up their march for the ferry, before the simple mule cart bearing the body. Even at the ferry the people could not give the precious burden up to strangers. As the boat pushed off from the island the beautiful voices, which their beloved teacher had helped to train, broke forth into some of the melodies she had loved to hear them sing. We believe if the whole true story of her life were told—of her sacrifice

of home with all its pleasures, of her sacrifice of her fortune, of the sweet companionship of friends, and of her constant devotion to her work, to the carrying out of this great undertaking—that she would be acknowledged the most heroic, earnest, and faithful friend the colored race has ever known.” *Endnote*

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Endnotes

1. "Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne" written from the Sea Island of South Carolina 1862–1884, edited by Rupert Sargent Holland.
2. "From Slavery to Freedom: The Penn Center and the Port Royal Experiment" by Donald Nieman, from Moments from the Past: An Exhibition in Celebration of The Penn Center of the Sea Islands, The I.P. Stanback Museum & Planetarium South Carolina State University, p. 43.
3. Edith Dabbs, Sea Island Diary A History of St. Helena Island; 1983, p.131.
4. *ibid.*, p.132.
5. Dabbs, p. 131.
6. Willie Lee Rose, Rehearsal For Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment, 1964, p.200–201.
7. Nieman, p. 47.
8. Nieman., p.48.
9. Holland, p.20.
10. Dabbs, p. 185.
11. *ibid.*
12. Holland, p. 22.
13. *ibid.*, p. 22.

14. Holland, p. 25.

15. Holland, p. 18.

16. *ibid.*, p. 23.

17. Holland., p. 26.

18. Dabbs, p. 145.

19. *ibid.*, p. 146.

20. Holland, p. 42.

21. *ibid.*, p. 43.

22. *ibid.*, p. 45.

23. Holland, p. 47.

24. *ibid.*, p.127.

25. *ibid.*, p. 130.

26. Holland, p. 301.

27. *ibid.* p. 303.

