

Joe Easley
Letter to the Freedmen's Bureau (1868)

Easley was one of thousands of recently-freed African Americans who wrote the Freedmen's Bureau for help obtaining food and medicine, locating family members, negotiating labor contracts, and other pressing matters. He lived in Texas. As his letter reveals, all is not well down South despite Republican efforts to remake the region.

Letter from Hopkins County, Sulphur Springs,
July 17, 1868.

Hon. M. L. Armstrong:

Dear Sir—I am this morning situated like a mariner whose vessel is sinking, and he is dripping out slips of paper, hoping they may fall into some friendly hands, that the world may know what became of him.

The reign of terror is set up in this county. I will not undertake to give a minute description of it; time and space is not sufficient. Suffice it to say that the history of the darkest ages of the world does not, in my estimation, afford a parallel.

It commenced about the 1st of June, by brutally murdering Charles Grimes, the old freedman who was on the Board of Registrars.¹ This occurred on Sunday night, as well as I recollect, about the 17th of June. There was not the least semblance of any provocation for the outrage. Next, I ascertained beyond a doubt that the same parties were seeking an opportunity to kill me. I was cultivating my farm two and a half miles from town. I employed hands who agreed to assist me until I could wind up my farming. Just as I was nearly through, I was waylaid by the assassins as I was returning from my farm house, but happening to see them in time I made my escape and got home. They then followed me to town the next day, and I was forced to take shelter in my house. There I remained for five days and nights, not venturing to poke my head out of doors day or night. Just at this time I ascertained that there were five wagon loads of government supplies landed here for soldiers, and at the same time one Ben Bickerstaff arrived with three men. The next day (which was day before yesterday) he attacked and took possession of all the stores, carrying off one wagon and team. He burned some of the provisions, it is said. Yesterday there was a party engaged in hauling off the goods. They were armed, and would not let any one come near enough to ascertain who they were; but the wagon tracks show where they went.

P. A. Turk, the Wagon Master, told me there were twenty or more armed men when he was robbed, all young men, mostly armed with double barreled guns and six shooters.

Mark you, Bickerstaff only had three men besides himself the day before. So you see he must have recruited 16 or 18 men here. Straws show which way the wind blows. At this juncture I was notified by those who professed to know, that I had but a few minutes to make my escape in. I saw two of the citizens, and they promised they would use their influence to save my family from being murdered; and this shows where I took up quarters.

¹ These were officials tasked with matters of the franchise: registering voters and certifying voter eligibility.

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I suppose you think strange of the murder of women and children. Ah, sir, it has already happened. About one week ago Minerva James was taken out of the house of Mr. Herman Spencer, four miles from this place, by five armed men, carried about one mile, and brutally murdered. [If I] had space to give you the particulars, you would say it was the most horrid murder you ever heard of.

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Three days ago there was a man by the name of Flowers, taken out of his house at night and killed. The next day a party of men were carrying him to the burying ground, when they were fired into, and one man and a little boy killed, and another man dangerously wounded, receiving a shot through the lungs.

Mark you, these are all Union men. No doctor will attend the wounded man; his name is Jesse Starr, whose brother was wounded by the Shelby men; and it was his little son that was killed.

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It is impossible to give the number of negroes that have been killed. There is a great many missing that have not been heard from. Four nights ago there was a freedman taken out of Buck Thomas' kitchen and carried out on the prairie and killed. There is no cause assigned or conjectured for his murder, as he was one of the most innocent of negroes. I mention this, as there is generally some pretext got up by the rebels for every murder. The would-be social class of rebels stand ever ready to fabricate false hoods and make excuses for all murders committed by their friends. The only excuse they could get up for the murder of Minerva James, was that she should have told some one (but nobody knows who) that she knew who killed Charley Grimes, and that when the soldiers came she was going to tell it. So you can see from what I have written, how things stand in this county.

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I was informed by Musgrove that we would have soldiers here. They were to have been here two weeks ago; still they have not come yet, and we can hear nothing from them. I have tried to rally the Union men, but all in vain; four is all that I can get together.

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The freed people have had all their arms taken away from them, and they are in the most deplorable condition of any people on earth. All that were living in the county by themselves, have been robbed of every thing of the least value—even taking the under dressing of freed women, their bed clothes; in a word every thing of the smallest value, and then driven from their homes into the woods. It is the most sickening sight I ever witnessed to see their fine corn crops now being destroyed by the stock. But I must close this sickening subject.

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I am aiming to send this letter to Dallas, to have it mailed. It is impossible to have anything of the kind sent from this county by mail. The postmasters are all Ku Klux.

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I see from the papers, you are doing all you can in the Convention to give protection; but if it comes at all, (which I very much doubt) it will be too late for most of the prominent Republicans. I know that I can't survive but a few days, unless there is a speedy change in our favor. They are recruiting daily. Every day makes them more bold and defiant. Every outrage they commit seems to increase their desire for something worse.

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I cannot leave my family to be murdered by them. I am bound to stay near them, so that I can

give them protection at night.

Show this to any one you see proper, I care not who. I don't suppose I will be alive when this comes to hand; at least the chances look slim. I prefer a martyr's grave to living a slave. I shall die the same.

Joe Easley.

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Source: Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Texas,
Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, 1865 - 1869
National Archives Microfilm Publication M821 Roll 32
Courtesy of: The Freedmen's Bureau Online
<http://www.freedmensbureau.com/texas/joeeasley.htm> (accessed 7/31/16)