

The Western Sanitary Commission reports on suffering in the Mississippi Valley, 1863

Introduction

In 1863 in the war-torn South, thousands were homeless and starving. Some of those most in need of aid were newly liberated slaves.

The Western Sanitary Commission was organized on September 5, 1861, by General John C. Fremont and D.L. Dix, a philanthropist from St. Louis, Missouri. The commission modeled itself after the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC), a federally endorsed organization that unified efforts of benevolent societies. The USSC and the WSC assumed similar roles: they set up hospitals and administered medical services, housed orphans, and improved sanitary and dietary conditions in military camps and prisons. But there was a major difference between the organizations: the WSC was not considered an official branch of the USSC and did not receive federal funding.

In October 1863, members of the WSC traveled to the Mississippi Valley to assess the situation there. Shocked by the suffering in communities of freedmen along the river, the commission alerted the senior officers who in turn wrote to Lincoln on November 6, stating, “No language can describe the suffering, destitution and neglect which prevail in some of their ‘camps.’” They described a region upended by the war; families were displaced, the sick were dying, and many were left without food, water, or shelter: “There are probably not less than fifty thousand, chiefly women and children, now within our lines, between Cairo and New Orleans, for whom no adequate provision has been made.”

The WSC requested Lincoln’s endorsement for their endeavors: “We now respectfully ask permission and authority to extend our labors to the suffering freed people of the South-West and South. If you will give us your endorsement in the undertaking before the people, we think we can raise large sums of money, and accomplish great good.” Their appeal to “offer our humble but active services, asking no reward of any kind, but the opportunity and encouragement to work” was accepted. The WSC accumulated \$30,000 in clothing and other necessary materials as well as \$13,000 in cash to assist the communities along the Mississippi. In recognition of his contributions, Lincoln later asked the WSC president, James Yeatman, to lead the Freedman’s Bureau.

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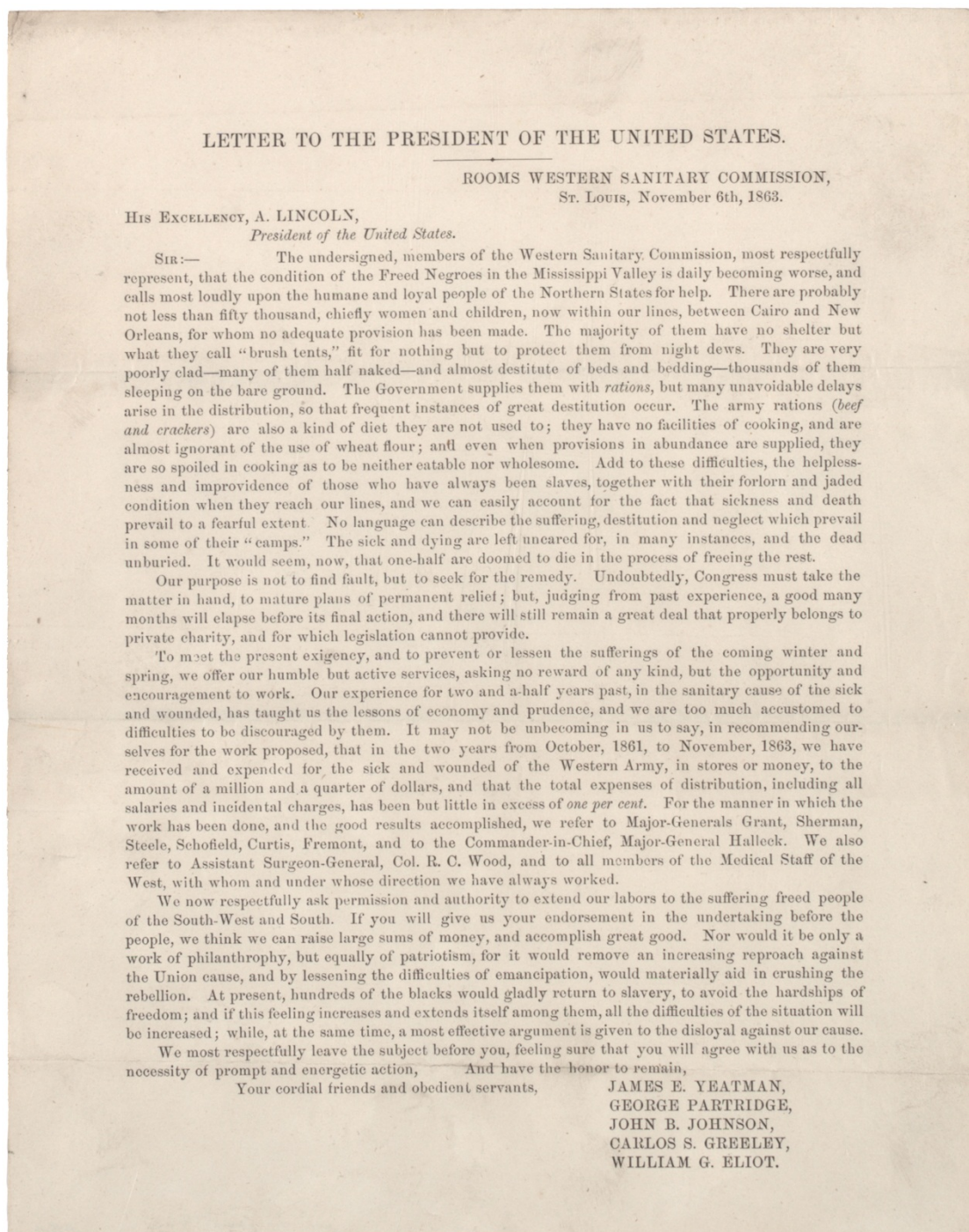
Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and the transcript, and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. The letter to President Lincoln appealing for permission to help stated that “hundreds of blacks would gladly return to slavery, to avoid the hardships of freedom.” How can this extraordinary statement be explained?
2. Make a list of the possible needs and requirements of newly freed African Americans.
3. How similar were the responsibilities of the Western Sanitary Commission in 1863 to the relief agencies following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans?
4. Explain the difficulties faced by the Western Sanitary Commission.

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Image



[Appeal from the Western Sanitary Commission to President Abraham Lincoln regarding the condition of freed slaves], November 6, 1863 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC01545.11)