

“The war ruined me”: The aftermath of the Civil War in the South, 1867

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Civil War, former slaveholders struggled to adjust to the economic conditions resulting from the end of slavery as well as the destruction of plantations and markets and the population loss. Many southern landowners fell into poverty as they faced depreciated land values and mounting debts.

In 1867, farmer and preacher A. C. Ramsey of Alabama wrote to his brother-in-law, Dr. J. J. Wardlaw expressing his family’s economic struggle after the Civil War. He forcefully declares that “the war ruined me” and left his children with “nothing but a piece of land.” Ramsey laments that even if he were able to sell his property, the payment would not cover all his debts. He reports where all his children are and what they are all doing to support themselves.

His bitterness is plain in the conclusion of his letter:

hundreds of men who were in good circumstances before the war are completely ruined . . . I believe they intend to give us a Territorial government, and place the negroe over us in point of privilege. I hope however the good Lord may intervene, and thwart their designs.

White southerners’ anger and resentment at the sudden transformation of their social and economic status led to the rise of the Jim Crow era, when laws were enacted to limit the freedom of African Americans and reassert White authority.

Excerpts

Now you will naturally enquire, why did I break up and scatter my family thus? Well I can give you the reasons in a few words. The war ruined me. Before it the children and I were worth \$45,000 in negroes and lands We had on the place about 65 negroes, after giving off Janie & Mary their share. The children had 35. and I had 30 of my own, besides eight or ten which my wife had; perfectly undisputed as we thought. I was however owing some money which I could easily have paid had the war not come on. But alas! the war came, I bent all my energies to its support, made nothing but provisions, all went to support the soldiers and their families, had no cotton on hand at the surrender, debts accumulating all the time, negroes gone, and here I was left with land and nothing else, and it greatly depreciated in value, and in fact could not sell it at all. My children left with nothing but a piece of land 320 acres and I not able to help them to a dollar, and besides a debt hanging over me now, that my land if it had have been sold, would not pay. So I saw nothing ahead but ruin. I therefore was led to the course I have taken from their Considerations; in order to make a support . . . How are the people in Carolina getting on, under the Calamities that have fallen upon the Country? There will be in this Country great distress and destitution; hundreds of men who were in good circumstances before the war are completely

ruined. Suing and being sued is the order of the day; and probably not more than one in ten will be able to survive the crash that awaits us. And what the Radicals will do, can only be judged of by their former acts, and propositions now in their Congress. I believe they intend to give us a Territorial government, and place the negroe over us in point of privilege. I hope however the good Lord may intervene, and thwart their designs

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the tone of A. C. Ramsey's letter?
2. How did the Civil War "ruin" Ramsey, according to him? Be specific in the claims he listed.
3. What asset did Ramsey have at the end of the Civil War?
4. What did Ramsey believe would be "the order of the day"?
5. What did Ramsey "hope" would happen?

Images

Wilcox Co. Ala. Jan. 3rd 1867.

Dr. J. J. Wardlaw

Dear Sir

As Mr Greer is going from this neigh-
borhood to Carolina I avail myself of the privilege of sending
this by him, who promises me he will convey it to you.

It has been so long since I wrote last, I hardly know where
to commence, as many changes and fluctuations, have taken
place with me and my family since then. I have broken
^{up} in this County partially, and am now living in Mobile; am
up here at this time on business. I rented out my residence
last year, & moved to my plantation, with a part of my family
the balance removed to Camden. I with my son Wardlaw
farmed last year, under the free negro system, and made
rather a poor crop, in consequence of bad seed, bad season
and poor work. I found that I was not able to follow good
men, and farm, so an opening presented itself in Mobile
& I went down there and engaged in the Commission
business with an old experienced merchant, and have
done thus far a small but safe business. I rented a
house, and ~~my~~ ^{myself &} wife are keeping a boarding house which
is paying very well, so between the two I am making a
support. I rented my farm to Wardlaw for the present year
and I hope he will be able to do well, although at present
it is hard getting negroes, nearly all our old stocks have left
and there is great difficulty in getting others. I shall try &
send him some from Mobile. I came up here before Christ

A. C. Ramsey to Dr. J. J. Wardlaw, January 3, 1867.

(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09311 p1)

mas, and have been very sick, am still confined to my room I had an attack of Pleurisy, but better, and will soon be out again I hope.

My children are scattered. Wardlaw & Janie are all that are here, Willie is in Camden Arkansas, went out there soon after the surrender, and doing well, as clerk in a house there at \$125. per month. Corrie is with us in Mobile and has a music class there that I think will pay her tolerably well. Benson has also moved to Mobile and has charge of a large Saddleery at about four thousand dollars a year. Dickie my youngest son has been going to school here, but I shall take him with me, and put him at school at Leitronelle thirty miles above Mobile on the Rail Road. I do this so as to have him nearer to me, his health is very bad.

Jo M Cracker will still remain at his old place. Wardlaw has a very nice wife and little daughter.

Marnie Jenkins is well and doing tolerably well, they still live in this neighborhood. Ann is teaching school at Monterey in Butler County. Bessie went back to Camden Ark, after the surrender, Willie went with her.

Now you will naturally enquire, why did I break up and scatter my family thus? Well I can give you the reasons in a few words. The war ruined me. Before it the children and I were worth \$75,000. in negroes and lands. We had on the place about 65 negroes, after giving off Janie & Mary their share. The children had 35. and I had 30 of my

A. C. Ramsey to Dr. J. J. Wardlaw, January 3, 1867.

(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09311 p2)

on, besides, eight or ten which my wife had; perfectly independent
 as we thought. I was however owing some money which I could
 easily have paid had the war not come on. But alas! the
 war came, I bent all my energies to its support, made
 nothing but provisions, all went to support the soldiers &
 their families, had no cotton on hand at the surrender,
 debts accumulating all the time, negroes gone, and now
 I was left with land and nothing else, and it greatly
 depreciated in value, and in fact could ^{not} sell it at all.
 My children left with nothing but a piece of land 320 acres
 and I not able to help them to a dollar, and besides a debt
 hanging over me now, that my land if it had been
 been sold, would not pay. So I saw nothing a head
 but ruin. I therefore was led to the course I have taken
 from these considerations, in order to make a support. If
 we could manage free labour profitably, I believe I could
 get come out, but from the experiment I have made I
 believe the system will not pay, all we make will go to them
 & their support. My children are all trying to make a sup-
 port for themselves. This state of affairs gives me now in my decline
 of life, great trouble and anxiety of mind. I thank God however
 that my children are mostly grown, educated, and settled in
 business, although not doing much yet making a support.
 I have two yet whose education is not finished. Bidie &
 Carrie, the only one by my present wife.

I should like very much to hear from you all once more and
 I know you will write to me, if an opportunity offers. I should

A. C. Ramsey to Dr. J. J. Wardlaw, January 3, 1867.

(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09311 p3)

also be very much pleased to get a letter from Robert and Jane
 but I suppose they have abandoned me, for committing the unpardon-
 able sin, of marrying again, as they have never written a word to
 me since. Well all I have to say to them is, I then done what I
 believed for the best, and subsequent events have proven to me I
 was right, and were it to do over again, I should act as I did
 then; for I then needed some one, to assist me, in raising and
 educating my children; one that would be as far as possible
 a mother to them; and thank God I got just such an one
 one who has never spoken an unkind word to one of them;
 one who has always given them the best of counsel; one who
 has spared no pains to make them comfortable, and feel
 that she cared for them; and one who has laboured with
 her hands night and day, to make them look respectable
 in society; and who visited them while off at school, and
 carried to them such things as they needed, and which
 was prepared by her own hands. In fact I have great reason
 to be thankful that I got such a wife, and I suppose there
 are few cases, when a step mother has gotten along with as
 little trouble, and bickorings as she has: true the children
 sometimes did not treat her as they ought to have done
 but as she says; and I know it is so, it was owing to out-
 side influences brought to bear on them. Efforts no doubt
 were made to turn the children against her. This had its
 effect for a time, but soon passed off; and now there is on
 the heads of those who attempted it, the censure that their course
 justly merited. Beside these considerations, she had an estate of

A. C. Ramsey to Dr. J. J. Wardlaw, January 3, 1867.

(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09311 p4)

of her own, which she has been, and is now seeking to assist us in getting along; and labouring hard in Mobile in keeping up the house, to assist us in supporting ourselves and the ~~two~~ children who are yet with us; and were it not for her I do not know what I would do now, under the sad reverses that have befallen me. She is very healthy, intellectual and pious and just such a wife as I needed, and thank God I got her, and if my old friends don't like it, and cannot forgive me, for doing what they would have done themselves under the same circumstances; I am sorry for it, but have no concessions to make, nor forgiveness to ask.

January 5th

I am improving very fast, and will return to Mobile in a few days. Address me at that place.

How are the people in Carolina getting on, under the calamities that have fallen upon the Country? There will be in this Country great distress and destitution; hundreds of men who were in good circumstances before the war are completely ruined. Living and being sued is the order of the day; and probably not more than one in two will be able to survive the crash that awaits us. And what the Radicals will do, can only be judged of by their former acts, and propositions now in their Congress. I believe they intend to give us a Territorial government, and place the negro over us in point of privilege. I hope however the good Lord may intervene, and thwart their designs.

I must close. I fear I have already written too much. Remember me kindly to your family and all the friends.

Affectionately your friend

A. C. Ramsey

A. C. Ramsey to Dr. J. J. Wardlaw, January 3, 1867.

(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09311 p5)

Transcript

Wilcox Co. Ala. Jan. 3rd 1867.

Dr. J. J. Wardlaw

Dear Sir

As Mr Greer is going from this neighborhood to Carolina I avail myself of the privilege of sending this by him, who promises me he will convey it to you.

It has been so long since I wrote last. I hardly know where to commence, as many changes and fluctuations, have taken place with me and my family since then. I have broken [*inserted: up*] in this County partially, and am now living in Mobile; am up here at this time on business. I rented out my residence last year, & moved to my plantation, with a part of my family the balance removed to Camden. I with my son Wardlaw farmed last year, under the free negroe system, and made rather a poor crop, in consequence of bad seed, bad season and poor work. I found that I was not able to follow freedmen, and farm, so an opening presented itself in Mobile & I went down there and engaged in the Commission business with an old experienced merchant, and have done thus for a small but safe business. I rented a house and [*inserted: myself &*] [*deleted: my*] wife are keeping a boarding house which is paying very well; so between the two I am making a support. I rented my farm to Wardlaw for the present year and I hope he will be able to do well, although at present it is hard getting negroes, nearly all our old stock have left and there is great difficulty in getting others. I shall try & send him some from Mobile. I came up here before Christ[2]mas, and have been very sick, am still confined to my room I had an attack of Pleurisey, but better, and will soon be out again I hope.

My children are scattered. Wardlaw & Janie are all that are here, Willie is in Camden Arkansas, went out there soon after the surrender, and doing well, as clerk in a house there at \$125 per month. Carrie is with us in Mobile and had a music class there that I think will pay her tolerably well. Benson has also moved to Mobile and has charge of a large Sadlery at about four thousand dollars a year. Bidie my youngest son has been going to school here, but I shall take him with me, and put him at school at Cittronelle thirty miles above Mobile on the Rail Road. I do this so as to have him nearer to me, his health is very bad. Jo M Crackin will still remain at his old place. Wardlaw has a very nice wife and little daughter.

Mamie Jenkins is well and doing tolerably well. They still live in this neighborhood. Ann is teaching school at Monterey in Butte County. Bessie went back to Camden Ark. after the surrender. Willie went with her.

Now you will naturally enquire, why did I break up and scatter my family thus? Well I can give you the reasons in [*insert: a*] few words. The war ruined me. Before it the children and I were worth \$45,000 in negroes and lands We had on the place about 65 negroes, after giving off Janie & Mary their share. The children had 35. and I had 30 of my [*3*] own, besides eight or ten which my wife had; perfectly independent as we thought. I was however owing some money which I could easily have paid had the war not come on. But alas! the war came, I bent all my energies to its support, made nothing but provisions, all went to support the soldiers & their families, had no cotton on hand at the surrender, debts accumulating all the time, negroes gone, and here I was left with land and nothing else, and it greatly depreciated in value, and in fact could [*insert: not*] sell it at all. My children left with nothing but a piece of land 320 acres and I not able to help them to a dollar; and besides a debt hanging over me now, that my land if it had have been sold, would not pay. So I saw nothing ahead but ruin. I therefore was led to the course I have taken from these Considerations; in order to make a support. If we could manage free labour profitably, I believe I could yet come out, but from the experiment I have made I believe the system will not pay, all we make will go to them & their support. My children are all trying to make a support for themselves. This state of affairs gives me now in my decline of life, great trouble and anxiety of mind. I thank God however that my children are mostly grown, educated, and settled in business, although not doing much yet making a support. I have two yet whose education is not finished. Bidie & Carrie, the only one by my present wife.

I should like very much to hear from you all once more and I know you will write to me, if an opportunity offers. I should [*4*] also be very much pleased to get a letter from Robert and Jane but I suppose they have abandoned me, for committing the unpardonable sin, of marrying again, as they have never written a word to me since. Well all I have to say to them is, I then done what I believed for the best, and subsequent events have proven to me I was right, and were it to do over again, I should act as I did then; for I needed some one, to assist me, in raising and educating my children; one that would be as far as possible a mother to them; and thank God I got just such an one one who has never spoken an unkind word to one of them; one who has always given them the best of counsel: one who has spared no pains to make them comfortable,

and feel that she cared for them; and one who has laboured with her hands night and day, to make them look respectable in society; and who visited them while off at school, and carried to them such things as they needed, and which was prepared by her own hands. In fact I have great reason to be thankful that I got such a wife, and I suppose there are few cases, when a step mother has gotten along with as little trouble, and bickerings as she has: true the children sometimes did not treat her as they ought to have done but as she says; and I know it is so, it was owing to outside influences brought to bear on them. Efforts no doubt were made to turn the children against her. This had its effect for a time, but soon passed off; and now there is on the heads of those who attempted it, the censure that their course justly merited. Besides these considerations, she had an Estate of [5] of her own, which she has been, and is now using to assist us in getting along; and labouring hard in Mobile in keeping up the house, to assist us in supporting ourselves and the [struck: them] children who are yet with us; and were it not for her I do not know what I would do now, under the sad reverses that have befallen me. She is very healthy, intellectual and pious and just such a wife as I needed, and thank God I got her, and if my old friends don't like it, and can not forgive me, for doing what they would have done themselves under the same circumstances; I am sorry for it, but have no concessions to make, nor forgiveness to ask.

January 6th

I am improving very fast, and will return to Mobile in a few days. Address me at that place. How are the people in Carolina getting on, under the Calamities that have fallen upon the Country? There will be in this Country great distress and destitution; hundreds of men who were in good circumstances before the war are completely ruined. Suing and being sued is the order of the day; and probably not more than one in ten will be able to survive the crash that awaits us. And what the Radicals will do, can only be judged of by their former acts, and propositions now in their Congress. I believe they intend to give us a Territorial government, and place the negroes over us in point of privilege. I hope however the good Lord may intervene, and thwart their designs

I must close. I fear I have already written too much. Remember me kindly to your family and all the friends

Affectionately your friend

A.C. Ramsey