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Tunis G. Campbell, Negro Reconstructionist In Georgia

By E. MERTON COULTER*

PART I

1. *Lord of St. Catherines*

IF Tunis G. Campbell was not a Negro carpetbagger, at least he was a Negro, and was a carpetbagger, depending on the definition which one may want to give to that term. Sometimes thought by some of his contemporaries to be a native of the West Indies,¹ and by others, of Boston and of Canada;² but in fact, he was born on April 1, 1812 in New Jersey—Bound Brook, in Somerset County; although Campbell, himself, on one occasion got confused and said that the event took place in Bond Brook, in Middlesex County,³ and in later life he wrote that his birthplace was Middlebrook,⁴ which was, in reality, no New Jersey town but merely the northern part of the village of Bound Brook. He had four sisters and five brothers. He received some education in a school on Long Island, where he was the only Negro pupil.

Being somewhat religiously inclined he thought at first of going as a missionary to Liberia, but soon gave up the idea and decided to do some lecturing along the lines of morality and advocating the abolition of slavery. His aggressive nature soon got him into trouble. He married and had two children, a boy, Tunis G. Campbell, Jr. and a girl, and thinking these not enough he adopted a son, Edward E. Howard.

The outbreak of the Civil War found him in New York City where he soon became connected with a bakery after having been rejected as a soldier because he was a Negro. Determined to have some part in the war, he wrote President Lincoln but got no answer. A little later he received a "commission" from the War Department ordering him to report to General Rufus Saxton at Hilton Head, on an island of the same name, off the coast of South Carolina. At one time, Campbell said this was during "the

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second year of the war," meaning 1862; but at another time he said it was in the late summer of 1863. Saxton had first arrived here in November, 1861, with Federal troops which landed and gradually occupied the Beaufort region. Soon he was ordered to take possession of the abandoned plantations in the vicinity and put to work the remaining Negroes, raising crops, and to encourage them to acquire skills in agriculture and other industrial pursuits, and, in general, promote their well-being.⁵ Work of this sort, especially promoting the well-being of the slaves, appealed to Campbell—but not by joining the army, which Saxton soon turned his attention to in enlarging it by enlisting slaves. Rather, Campbell liked later to brag that Lincoln had sent him "to organize civil government, to improve the colored people in the South wherever I could do it, to instruct and elevate the colored race." He said that he came to South Carolina with \$3,000 or \$4,000 of his own.⁶ Without specifying exactly what Saxton set him to doing, he admitted that "he did whatever was entrusted to me, I think, to his satisfaction."

General William T. Sherman after sweeping across Georgia in the fall of 1864 and seizing Savannah in late December, issued his Special Field Order No. 15, on January 16, 1865. Herein he set apart the sea islands from Charleston to the St. Johns River, in Florida, and the abandoned rice plantation up the rivers for thirty miles, to be a reservation for the Negroes, where no white refugees were to be settled, and where the Negroes were to have "the sole and exclusive management of affairs," subject only to the military authorities and the laws of Congress. The Negroes were to be given "possessory title" to as much as forty acres; but this did not give fee simple ownership and was intended only as a temporary measure to take care of the Negroes,⁷ for Sherman wanted "to get them off his hands."

This arrangement afforded an ideal opportunity for Campbell to give play to his inclinations and ambitions. Immediately on the fall of Charleston, in February, 1865, he requested that he be transferred to the sea islands of Georgia, to engage in this work—this date he gave in later life, though earlier manifestly mistaken he said

it was in 1864, and at even another time he said that it was 1863.⁸ These lapses of memory or pure carelessness of facts were characteristic of Campbell.

Soon after Sherman's Field Order, Congress passed an act setting up in the War Department the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (generally referred to as the Freedmen's Bureau); and Saxton appointed Campbell as an agent in that organization. He assigned him to certain of the sea islands of Georgia and to the coastal strip extending thirty miles back. In referring at a later date to his appointment a correspondent of the *New York Herald*, called him a Negro preacher, "possessed of some little education and much cunning and unbounded ambition," mistakenly having him hail from New Brunswick, Canada.⁹ Campbell himself would not dismiss his appointment in such a low key. He was not a mere Bureau agent: "I came down as the governor of the islands of St. Catherine, Sapelo, Ossabaw, and other islands," and his authority extended to the mainland "as far as I could reach anywhere within thirty miles."¹⁰ And in addition to all this authority he was religious overlord of and missionary to the provinces of all Georgia and Florida for the Zion Methodist Episcopal Church.¹¹

Coming into a region now existing only in a state of nature, he was ordered "to organize and establish governments" over his island kingdom and to protect the freedmen for thirty miles back on the mainland, according to his version of his credentials. He always referred to himself as "governor," though he was called by some people, including some of his subjects, as the "tycoon." His son Tunis G., Jr. was his lieutenant governor. He appointed a cabinet and wrote out an instrument of fundamental law providing for a senate of 8 and a house of 20, as well as for a court with a chief justice, who over Campbell's reign of two years was a Negro from the African Congo. The house could override the senate by a two-thirds vote, and Campbell could override both. Much of this government was on paper only, but Campbell himself was much in evidence. The homeland of this kingdom was St. Catherines, and what government there was was located

there; the other islands were outlying dependencies. The members of the house and senate were evenly divided between the upper and nether ends of St. Catherines. One of his first official acts was to serve with his son Tunis G., Jr. as executor of a will. One of the first acts of the legislature was to pass a law forbidding any white person to set foot on the islands—or this might have been a proclamation by Governor Campbell, for no governmental archives survived, even if any ever existed. To enforce his will, execute his decrees and the laws, and preserve order, he raised an army of 275—at least, as he said, “on my muster-roll.”¹²

Knowing the forms and language of state papers, soon after his accession to power, he issued this proclamation: “Whereas we, through the goodness of God, the Supreme Being, have prospered upon this island, and whereas we feel now the influence of the boon of freedom, which we believe emanated from God.

“Therefore I, Tunis G. Campbell, Agent of the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees and Abandoned Lands for St. Catherine’s and Assabow [Ossabaw] Islands, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the President of the United States and Brigadier General Saxton, do issue this my proclamation, that the people do assemble on December 5, 1865, at their churches and invoke Divine aid and return thanks for His great mercy in delivering us from the bond of slavery and all other mercies vouchsafed to us.

“In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and seal.

TUNIS G. CAMPBELL, Superintendent.

[Edward E.] Howard, Secretary.”¹³ Howard was his adopted son and apparently his Secretary of State. When not signing himself as “governor” or “superintendent,” Campbell used the impressive collection of letters after his name, “A. B. R. F. & A. L. Ga.,” meaning Agent Bureau Refugees, Freedmen & Abandoned Lands Georgia.

In this grandiloquent venture, Campbell was not to express himself entirely in showmanship; he had a genuine desire to uplift the freedmen, while at the same time to take care of his own interests. He believed in educating his subjects, and in the beginning it was largely a family affair according to his statement,

for the three teachers of the two schools on St. Catherines were his wife, his son Tunis G., Jr., and his adopted son Edward E. Howard. There were 250 pupils in the schools in 1866, and he said that they were being educated at his expense.¹⁴ In carrying out further his interest in educating the Negroes he attended on May 1, 1866, the Educational Convention of the Freedmen of Georgia in Macon and was elected vice president and placed on important committees.¹⁵

When it came to Campbell's exploitation of St. Catherines and of the 625 freedmen there in 1866 (at some other time of the year the number given was 567), his reputation as a disinterested statesman suffered. In parcelling out the land, he took possession of some of the best part for himself and his family, and seemed to have left the freedmen to their own devices in making their way. General Davis Tillson, who succeeded Saxton in the Freedmen's Bureau, referring to Campbell as "a person of great plausibility and remarkable cunning," said that he directed the cutting of wood and sold it to the passing steamers and pocketed the money, giving a little of it out to some of his leaders. As for most of the freedmen they were soon in want and lived on United States government rations for the most part, added on the pittance they raised on their farms, although they held the south end of the island, which was the most fertile part. Instead of working their lands they spent most of their time hunting and fishing, killing off the deer and slaughtering the cattle which the fleeing owners had left on the island. Some of the venison and beef they sold at high prices in Savannah.

The story was quite different with another part of the freedmen, 147 of them, who worked for wages on 550 acres in cotton and 115 in corn, a part of the 17,000-acre Waldburger plantation, which Winchester & Schuyler, two Northern speculators, had leased. Working against Campbell's wishes, they raised twice the amount of cotton and corn which the rest of the freedmen raised on the whole south end of the island, only 400 acres of which they attempted to work. Two other Northern speculators ran all of the farming activities on Sapelo and gave the freedmen two-

thirds of the crops.¹⁶

Ten years later, a Georgia newspaper, sizing up Campbell and his reign on St. Catherine's, said that he was a "first-class buccaneer and filibuster, . . . asserting his authority as the rightful successor of the ancient queen of St. Catherine's in the days of Tomo-chi-chi," and that he "reigned as absolute as the King of Dahomey." "After a brief but glorious career," it continued, "during which Tunis hunted the red deer that abounded on the island, feasted upon fish and turtle, exacted tribute from his willing subjects, imposed tasks which he himself would not so much touch with his little finger, the universal greed of the average Yankee proved his downfall"—explaining that a Yankee had bought the whole island from the "rebel owner," and when the purchaser sought to take possession, Campbell in all his sovereign power repelled him with force of arms. The new owner then applied for Federal troops and Colonel Collins with a menacing detachment drove Campbell off the island.¹⁷

NOTES

- ¹*Savannah Morning News*, May 15 (3, 5), 1875.
- ²*New York Herald*, June 2, 13, 1866.
- ³*Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States* (13 vols. Washington, 1872), VII (Georgia, Part II), 853. Referred to hereafter under binder's title, *Ku Klux Conspiracy*.
- ⁴*Sufferings of the Rev. T. G. Campbell and his Family in Georgia* (Washington, 1877), 5.
- ⁵*War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (127 books and index. Washington, 1880-1901), Ser. III, Vol. II, 27-28, 152-53; Ser. I, Vol. VI, 186-87.
- ⁶*Ku Klux Conspiracy*, VII (Georgia, Part II), 854.
- ⁷*Memoirs of William T. Sherman. By Himself* (2 vols. New York, 1875), II, 250-52.
- ⁸*Sufferings of Campbell*, 7; *Ku Klux Conspiracy*, VII (Georgia, Part II), 846, 854.
- ⁹*New York Herald*, June 2, 1866.
- ¹⁰*Ku Klux Conspiracy*, VII (Georgia, Part II), 846.
- ¹¹*Ibid.*, 846; *Sufferings of Campbell*, 8.
- ¹²*New York Herald*, June 2, 1866; *Ku Klux Conspiracy*, VII (Georgia, Part II), 854, 936-37; McIntosh County (Darien) Deed Record B, 76-77.
- ¹³*New York Herald*, June 2, 1866.
- ¹⁴Campbell, St. Catherines Island, Ga., April 11, 1866, to to American Missionary Association (No. 19790 in American Missionary Association Archives, Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn.).
- ¹⁵*Tri-Weekly Sumter Republican* (Americus, Ga.), May 4 (2, 2), 1867.
- ¹⁶Davis Tillson, Augusta, Ga., November 1, 1866, to O. O. Howard, Washington, in "Letter of the Secretary of War . . . Communicating Reports of the Assistant Commissioners of Freedmen . . ." to the United States Senate, January 3, 1867, being *Senate Executive Document*, No. 6 (Serial number 1276), 53-54; *New York Herald*, January 2, 13, 1866.
- ¹⁷*Savannah Morning News*, May 15 (3, 5), 1875, quoting *Macon Telegraph*, without date.

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Even more recently, historians have moved beyond the restoration of their reputations to examine how these black politicians functioned within the Republican coalition. This emphasis on the way they used office, rather than on merely their qualifications for holding it, has resulted in several important insights. The first is that these men were politically skillful, and they maneuvered with some degree of success to develop influence. After initially playing second fiddle to the more politically experienced whites, many black officeholders decided to mobilize their own forces. Accordingly, they demanded that blacks be nominated for positions inside the party apparatus and that they be given an increased share of appointive offices as well as jobs in public services such as the police and fire departments and the educational system. Meanwhile, they organized effectively to get African Americans on the Republican ticket in districts with black majorities. Finally, they expanded their influence in several state legislatures by seizing key committee assignments, a strategy that was particularly successful in South Carolina and Mississippi by the early 1870s.

A second feature of the black leadership was that, despite its general cohesiveness, it suffered from factionalism. Most often, dissen-

sion arose when blacks were courted by competing white factions within the party. This occurred frequently in Alabama and Florida during the 1870s. In South Carolina, blacks divided in 1875–76 when Governor Daniel Chamberlain embarked on a risky maneuver to form an alliance with the more conciliatory wing of the Democratic party. From time to time, division also arose because disagreements emerged among blacks themselves. For instance, in Louisiana from 1869 to 1871, political rivalry between Oscar Dunn and P. B. S. Pinchback caused a serious rift among black Republicans. Also evident, to some extent, was a division based on social status and economic interest. This occurred particularly in Charleston and New Orleans, where there existed a substantial Negro elite that was propertied, freeborn, and usually mulatto. Recently, several historians, chiefly Thomas C. Holt in his study of black political leaders in South Carolina, *Black Over White* (1977), have claimed that they acted self-consciously to preserve their privileged position. To this end, they voted for a literacy and property qualification on the suffrage and they sometimes opposed legislation to protect agricultural laborers against their employers. This split between the freeborn browns and the formerly enslaved blacks was probably most evident in Charleston, where many browns went so far as to support Chamberlain's break with the party's black electoral base. Elsewhere, however, the rift between browns and blacks was of limited political significance because the former were either too few numerically to be of consequence or else were well aware that, as was the case in New Orleans, their own prospects and those of most former slaves were interdependent.

The third facet of African American politics that has recently become more evident was the constant need to form working relationships with white Republican politicians and voters. Although a black politician could not gain election without a black electoral base, he also could not succeed without the cooperation of whites. Those like Aaron A. Bradley and Tunis Campbell in Georgia who purposefully spurned white support soon became marginal. Thus, the success of a black politician depended upon his skill in consolidating his black constituency while simultaneously developing essential backing from whites, both within his district and inside the party

organization. Yet interracial coalitions and alliances were difficult to assemble and even more difficult to sustain. After all, native-born white southerners were reluctant to support black candidates, while the white northerners more likely to do so were competing with the latter to represent the same black constituency.

Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 239-241.

Tunis G. Campbell was one of many northern black men who brought considerable talents and resources to the task of reconstructing the ex-slave South, but few built such a formidable local following or invited such intense controversy. Born in New Jersey in 1812 and educated at a white Episcopal school in neighboring New York, Campbell became active in both the antislavery and black convention movements, converted to Methodism, and worked for more than a decade as a hotel steward. Too old to enlist for active military service, he set out for Union-occupied Port Royal, South Carolina, in the summer of 1863 with the endorsement of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and more than three thousand dollars of his own money, hoping to assist in educating the freedpeople and promoting a biracial democracy. Commissioned in the spring of 1865 as the superintendent of the Georgia Sea Islands and already convinced of the need for "separatism for strength," Campbell then established freed colonies on St. Catherine's and Sapelo Islands with their own governments, militia companies, and

schools, and, when it became necessary, helped mobilize settlers to fend off the restoration of their lands to the original white owners. But federal harassment eventually persuaded Campbell to abandon the islands and to seek a new base on the mainland of McIntosh County, where he and many of his followers could be found when Congress initiated Radical Reconstruction.⁴²

Campbell had a keen understanding of the essentials of political power and the aspirations of freed communities. Advancing \$1,000, he leased a 1,250 acre plantation from a Union sympathizer and divided it among black families who would control the plots and pay an annual rent in kind. He wrote a constitution and organized the BelleVille Farmers Association to function much like a local government with elected officials. And he gained appointment as an election registrar, thereby enrolling and educating prospective black voters in McIntosh and two adjoining counties; the potential of the fivefold registration advantage that blacks subsequently enjoyed was not lost on him. By the summer of 1867, a Freedmen's Bureau agent found the colony in "a most promising condition" economically and the hundred-odd denizens preparing to erect a schoolhouse. In November, Campbell was selected as a delegate to the state constitutional convention, and the following April Campbell's son was elected to the statehouse while Campbell himself won election as state senator and local justice of the peace. The rice planter Frances Butler Leigh saw in these results the "most absolute control" that Campbell exercised over McIntosh County blacks.⁴³

Although Campbell's control was hardly absolute, he did come to wield enormous influence. Not only as leader of the BelleVille colony, as election registrar, and as justice of the peace, but also as an elder in the AME Zion Church, he could play the roles most closely attuned to the needs of rural freedpeople and speak a language that resonated with their political sensibilities. Frequently calling county blacks together to answer questions about labor relations, counsel them about contracting, encourage them to "save their money so that they may buy homes," and instruct them as to their political duties, he seemed to mix practical advice and "good republican doctrine" with a spiritual cadence and fervor. Equally impervious to bribery or intimidation, Campbell thereby won deep and abiding personal support (one federal official claimed that his followers "almost worship him") and used it

to build a political machine and grassroots organization, replete with a citizens' militia company that strongly resembled a chapter of the Union League. While Republican prospects in the State of Georgia and most black initiatives at the local level there either began to flounder or meet strong conservative resistance, black power in McIntosh County continued to grow and become more firmly entrenched.⁴⁴

Nowhere were the implications more evident or irritating to white planters than in Campbell's justice's court. With two black constables to assist him, and eventually a black sheriff and deputy sheriff to lend added muscle, Campbell provided black laborers with new leverage in their relations with white employers. Showing no patience for the mistreatment, insults, swindles, and personal abuse to which the freed-people were customarily subjected, he had the accused arrested, brought before his bench, and, if found guilty, fined. Not surprisingly, local planters became indignant and charged that Campbell "administered justice with a high hand and happy disregard of the law." "[H]e is tyrannical overbearing and determines questions not upon principles of law but by his individual prejudice and caprice," one scowled; and his "teachings" are "calculate[d] to destroy the efficiency of labor in this section and inaugurate a reign of terror." For their part, freed-people often left the plantations "en masse" to attend Campbell's court and associated political meetings and, by one account, commonly returned with "a disposition to refuse to enter into contracts, or if already made to violate them." It would not be long before McIntosh County whites launched a series of vindictive, and ultimately successful, strikes against Campbell. But it would be years before black political power in the county was fully dislodged, and never would there be a return to the old order. During the early twentieth century there was an atmosphere of moderation in race relations and an economic landscape in which three of four black families owned their homes.⁴⁵

42. Duncan, *Freedom's Shore*, 12-41; William S. McFeely, *Sapelo's People: A Long Walk into Freedom* (New York, 1994), 94-98; Paul A. Cimbala, *Under the Guardianship of the Nation: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Reconstruction of Georgia, 1865-1870* (Athens, Ga., 1997), 177-188.

43. Tunis G. Campbell, "Declaration of BelleVille Farmers Association," 4 Mar. 1867, BRFAL, Savannah Subasst. Comr., ser. 1021, Misc. Recs [A-5788]; Charles R. Holcombe to Col. C. C. Sibley, 21 July 1867, BRFAL, Ga. Asst. Comr., roll 18; Frances Butler Leigh, *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation since the War* (London, 1883), 133-134; Duncan, *Freedom's Shore*, 21-38. The initial registration tallies for McIntosh County had 675 blacks and 128 whites.

44. Lectured Crawford et al. to Honorable Committee of the Senate, 20 May 1872.

and Lt. James H. Bradley to Bvt. Col. J. H. Taylor, 13 June 1872, both in Tunis
G. Campbell File, folder 1, GDAH; Leigh, *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation*, 135-
137; Duncan, *Freedom's Shore*, 64-67; Smith, "Down Freedom's Road," 120.
45. *Affairs of Late Insurrectionary States*, vol. 7, 858; Leigh, *Ten Years on a Georgia
Plantation*, 133-134; Testimony of William R. Gignilliat, 18 May 1872, Campbell
File, folder 1; Duncan, *Freedom's Shore*, 77; Smith, "Down Freedom's Road," 118-
120.