

ELIZABETH PARSONS BRECK



1826-1914

Born: Jun. 29, 1826 in Northampton, MA

Died: Aug. 13, 1914 in Los Angeles, CA

Appointment(s):

New England Freedmen's Aid Society (NEFAS)

Mitchelville - Hilton Head, SC

Sep. 1864

Principal – Morris Street School

Charleston, SC

Apr. 1865

Elizabeth Breck was born June 29, 1826 in Northampton, Hampshire Co., Massachusetts to Deacon Aaron Breck (1791-1868) and Grace Eastman (1793-1878). She had four sisters and two brothers. According to the US Census, she was living in Northampton from 1850-1880. Elizabeth's paternal grandfather was Dr. Samuel Breck born May 29, 1755 in Great Barrington, Berkshire Co., Massachusetts and died March 4, 1804 in Kinderhook, New York. Dr. Breck served in the American Revolutionary War.

Hannah Stevenson of the New England Freedmen's Aid Society helped Elizabeth press the Northampton branch to send Elizabeth to Mitchelville, SC as a teacher to the freedmen. Ms. Stevenson wrote to the branch on October 8, 1864: "I send you this letter to say that we intend to provide at once for Mitchelville what they need so sorely, i.e. Teachers and a house for the Teachers to live in. Will Northampton feel able so to increase its action as to undertake to raise the funds for building such a house? The estimated cost is \$250, but probably it would be more, say \$300."¹ Several days later, they received a positive response and Ms. Breck set sail for Hilton Head. The *Springfield Republican* noted this event:

Miss Breck of Northampton started last Friday for Hilton Head, South Carolina where she goes as a teacher of the freedmen. Miss Breck has had much experience as a teacher, both in New England and the west, and is eminently fitted for the task of establishing

¹ Faulkner, Carol. Women's Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen's Aid Movement. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, p 55.

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a school in Mitchelville, a colony planted by Gen. Mitchell, about a mile from Hilton Head.²

Thus, Miss Breck was assigned by the New England Freedmen's Aid Society in October 1864 to be a teacher to the freedmen at Mitchelville, South Carolina.³ She was sponsored by the Northampton FAS. In a letter she wrote from Hilton Head on November 12, 1865, she confirms the information that Mrs. Pillsbury shared in her letter of the same date.

On arriving here, we were very cordially welcomed by Mr. and Mrs. Pillsbury, with whom we are now staying. Our house is expected to be done next Tuesday. It will be necessary for us to have a cooking stove, and a few other articles, as we expect to do our own cooking.

Yours,

Elizabeth P.⁴

Since her sponsor, the Northampton Freedmen's Association helped fund the costs of building the school at Mitchelville, she described the Mitchelville settlement and the conditions there in a letter dated December 23, 1864 to NEFAS Secretary Cochran.

There are in this village for the colored 456 houses already completed and 22 now in the process of erection with one third of an acre on each lot. About one half the houses have been built at the expense of the government. The inhabitants are constantly increasing as we learn by a census recently taken that we have 273 colored people here, all of whom support themselves, except for about 100 infirm ones, whom the government furnish with rations.⁵

To urge Northerners to continue to contribute, Elizabeth played on their emotions and created sympathy, especially for the freed women. She shared horror stories of black women who had suffered greatly - older women who had watched their own children being lashed by plantation overseers or being sold away from them to distant slave owners⁶. She also told about young pregnant slave women whose

² Springfield Republican. "Miss Elizabeth P Breck Obituary". Thursday, Nov 8, 1864, p 4.

³ Freedmen's Aid Society. *Freedmen's Record*, Vol I, No1, 'List of Teachers' Jan 1864, p 3, 65.

- New England Freedman's Association. "Teachers Sent to South Carolina in 1864-65".

<http://www.bronstontours.com>.

⁴ Freedmen's Aid Society. *Freedmen's Record*, Vol I, No 12, Dec 1865.

⁵ Faulkner, p 56.

⁶ Ibid, p 57.

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husbands had been hung for cheering the arrival of the Yankee soldiers.⁷ Elizabeth ended many of her letters with appreciation and a blessing for their generosity, such as, “May the blessings of Heaven descend in copious showers upon those who have so promptly responded to my appeal for aid in behalf of these suffering people.”

She transferred in April 1865 to Charleston where she served as the Department Principal at Morris Street School under Principal Mrs. Antoinette F. Pillsbury.⁸ However, at least by November 1865, she was back in Hilton Head as evidenced by her letters in November and December from Hilton Head.⁹ It seems that Ms. Breck was appointed at that time by the American Freedmen’s Union Commission (AFUC) as she corresponded with them about their fear of a declining interest in the North and the spreading opinion that the freedmen were too dependent on the whites because of their generous benevolence. Ms. Breck wrote a letter published in the Daily Hampshire Gazette on November 8, 1866 stating, “I trust the Northern people will not become weary and relax their efforts in behalf of the freedmen, with the idea that enough has been done and it is now time for them to take care of themselves.”¹⁰

Elizabeth moved to Los Angeles, California by 1900 and was still living there in 1910. She died August 13, 1914 in Los Angeles and is buried in the Evergreen Cemetery in the Hollenbeck Home Plot¹¹. She and her unmarried sister Ruth had moved into the home for the elderly as their health deteriorated. The *Springfield Republican* published her obituary on August 25, 1914, p 13.¹²

Miss Elizabeth Parsons Breck, 88, who died in Los Angeles, California the 13th, was the daughter of the late Aaron Breck of Northampton. She is survived by a sister, Miss Ruth Breck of Los Angeles. Elizabeth is buried with her sister Ruth Sheldon Breck in Evergreen Cemetery, Hollenbeck Home plot. They spent their last years at the Hollenbeck Home for the Aged on Boyle Avenue in Los Angeles. The Hollenbeck Home for the Aged was opened in Los Angeles, California in 1896, named after John and Elizabeth Hollenbeck from Germany.

⁷ Ibid. p 57.

⁸ Freedmen’s Aid Society. *Freedmen’s Record*, Vol I, No 5, May 1865, p 86.

⁹ Freedmen’s Aid Society. *Freedmen’s Record*, Vol 1, Nos 2 & 3. Feb – Mar 1865, pp 31-32 and Nos 11 & 12 Nov-Dec, 1865 [Letters from Hilton Head, SC].

¹⁰ New England Freedmen’s Aid Society. NEFAS Papers. Smith College: Sophia Smith Collection.

¹¹ Findagrave.com Memorial # 9784206 created November 9, 2004 by Shriver with a photo of her tombstone added April 15, 2014 by TLS.

¹² *Springfield Republican*. “Miss Elizabeth Parsons Breck: Obituary”. August 25, 1914, p 13.