Charlotte Forten grew up in her grandfather's large comfortable house in Philadelphia. Her grandfather, James Forten, Sr., owned a sailmaking business and was one of the most highly respected citizens of Philadelphia.

Christmas of 1841 was memorable for Charlotte, who was then four years old. She remembered it as the last Christmas with Grandfather, for he died early in 1842. That Christmas Day the house overflowed with family members and friends, and as many white visitors as black came to call.

The black guests were from Philadelphia's sizable community of free blacks, except for two runaway slaves who had sought shelter on their way to Canada. (Years earlier, Grandfather Forten and Uncle Robert Purvis had formed the Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia, which later became the Underground Railroad.)

Among the white guests were sea captains and great shipping merchants. Also visiting were members of the Pennsylvania legislature, who admired Grandfather for his lifelong struggle for laws that would assure fair treatment for the free blacks. James and Lucretia Mott, the abolitionists, were also there. But the white visitor who interested Charlotte most was tall, gentle, dark-eyed John Greenleaf Whittier, the Quaker poet.

Many years later, while the Civil War was raging and Charlotte was teaching in Salem, the poet invited her and a friend to his home in Amesbury. That evening he told her, "Charlotte, you should apply to the Port Royal Commission. There is great need for your services among the freed people of the South Carolina islands."

The islands were noted for their great plantations, which produced the famous Sea Islands cotton. The Union fleet had captured the islands and their principal town, Beaufort, located on Port Royal Island. The Union army and navy planned to use the islands as a base from which to attack the Confederate forts that protected the important city of Charleston, South Carolina.

Some ten thousand slaves remained in the Port Royal region, deserted by their masters who had fled to the mainland. The Sea Islands slaves were the most isolated of all the Southern slaves. They had lived for generations with almost no contact with the outside world, not even with blacks from other areas. Their speech was an unusual mixture of African and English words.

The Northern generals worried about these people. Could they harvest the valuable crops of cotton? Would they fight for their freedom?

The problem was given to the Treasury Department in Washington. The secretary of the treasury believed that if the former slaves were trained by skilled supervisors, taught by experienced teachers, and given some government help, they could surely run the great cotton plantations by themselves.

The government paid the superintendents who directed the plantation workers, but the teachers had to depend upon abolition societies for their small salaries.

Charlotte Forten was accepted as one of more than fifty agents of the Port Royal Relief Association. She was the only black and thus felt a great responsibility.

In late October 1862, Charlotte and her traveling companions, the Hunns, arrived at Beaufort, where a pleasant-looking woman waited on the wharf. "I am Laura Towne," she

said to Charlotte. "I am so glad that you are to teach in my school on Saint Helena Island."

Charlotte was instantly drawn to this calm-looking teacher, physician, and antislavery worker.

A small boat took them to Saint Helena Island, and there Miss Towne's carriage waited for them. After a night's rest at the superintendent's house, Miss Towne drove them to their future home, a deserted plantation named Oaklands.

The house was rundown and empty, but an elderly former slave soon appeared with bedsteads, chairs, and small tables. A woman came with eggs and grits for their dinner and said she would cook, wash, and iron for them. Charlotte was glad that John Hunn and his daughter Lizzie were with her. Mr. Hunn was an elderly, shabbily dressed Quaker who had been fined $3000 in Delaware for sheltering an escaped slave. His mission was to set up a store at which the freed people could buy household articles and clothing at low prices.

Within a few days, when the house was looking more habitable, Charlotte began the task she had come for—teaching the former slaves not only to read and write but to have renewed respect for themselves and their race.

Riding an old horse, she visited each cabin and instructed the people in rules of health and cleanliness. She cut out dresses and flannel jackets for the old women and sewed garments for newborn babies. She helped with the sick. The people responded with a devotion that sometimes moved her to tears.

Her school was held in the Baptist church, a large brick building set in a grove of oak trees. Fifty-eight children were placed in her care.

Some of her pupils were very small, brought to school by the older children who had to take care of them while their parents worked. During the summer the older children worked in the fields, too, from early morning until about noon, and then they came to school.

All the children loved to sing, and Charlotte soon had even the tiny ones singing their ABC's. Teaching the older ones was difficult, for there weren't enough books and slates; and more than a hundred children divided into several classes recited at the same time in the same room.

But the children appeared not to suffer from the confusion. "Their desire and quickness in learning to read surprises everyone," wrote one teacher. "Their memories are usually excellent, their power of observation keen. Of course there are some slower ones, but the majority learn with amazing speed."

Often in the evening when Charlotte was reading, there would be a gentle tap on the door. It's Harry, she would say to herself and jump up to let him in.

Harry was a tall, broad man in his thirties, a field hand who wanted desperately to learn to read and write. Since he had to work in the fields during the day, the only time he had for lessons was at night.

Soon Charlotte had an entire class of men and women who came at night. They traced their letters on their slates with stiff, toilworn fingers. They read painfully from their children's schoolbooks. But they did read and they did write.

These were Charlotte Forten's people, and the young black schoolteacher from Philadelphia was truly proud of them.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. **The author implies that Charlotte's family had**
   A some money but few friends
   B a comfortable life
   C little regard for education

2. **Many of the Fortens' Christmas guests were**
   A free blacks from Philadelphia
   B Dutch slave merchants
   C relatives from England

3. **The guest that interested Charlotte the most was**
   A President John Tyler
   B James Mott
   C John Greenleaf Whittier

4. **During the Civil War Charlotte was urged to apply**
   A to medical school
   B to the Port Royal Commission
   C for a commission in the army

5. **The Union forces thought that the Sea Islands were important because they were**
   A good military bases
   B excellent hiding places
   C Both A and B

6. **The secretary of the treasury thought that the people of the Port Royal region**
   A were too backward to be free
   B should be trained to help themselves
   C should be sent to the north

7. **Among the agents of the Port Royal Relief Association Charlotte was**
   A the only black
   B the only qualified teacher
   C Both A and B

8. **Charlotte looked upon the teaching of reading and writing as**
   A only part of her job
   B her only important task
   C wasted effort on her part

9. **When Charlotte established her school, the children**
   A were afraid to attend
   B showed enthusiasm for learning
   C had behavior problems

10. **Charlotte began teaching the men and women of the island**
    A during their lunchtime
    B in the fields where they worked
    C at night after her regular classes

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