The “Contact of Living Souls”:
Shepard Gilbert’s Civics Education
in Reconstruction South Carolina

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FEW topics have engendered as much impassioned debate
among historians as Southern Reconstruction. But through-
out waves of revision and counter-revision, scholars across the
political spectrum have largely agreed on one fundamental
point: Northern crusaders failed in their attempt to remake
Southern society primarily due to their own hypocrisy and ve-
nality, or their era’s inescapable racism, or both. Ranging in
degrees of vitriol from Dunning to Woodward, Reconstruc-
tion’s harshest critics have disdained Northern adventurers who
masqueraded as social reformers.¹ More sympathetic historians
have argued that a deeply engrained racial chauvinism created
a gulf between even the best-intentioned Northern activists and
Southern blacks, thereby precluding sincere personal relation-
ships and a truly equal society.²

My title is taken from William Edward Burghardt DuBois, “Souls of Black Folk,” in
p. 43. The research librarians at the Peabody Essex Museum’s Phillips Library and at
the Harvard University Archives have been generous with their assistance. I owe an
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would like to thank Lynn Rhoads for her editorial patience and skill.

¹William Archibald Dunning, Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865–1877
(New York: Harper & Bros., 1907), and C. Vann Woodward, “Seeds of Failure in
Radical Race Policy,” Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 110,

²Henry Lee Swint, The Northern Teacher in the South, 1862–1870 (New York:
Octagon Books, 1967); Robert Charles Morris, Reading, ’Riting, and Reconstruction:
Quarterly. All rights reserved. doi:10.1162/TNEQ_a_00455.
As numerous scholars have noted, embracing the cause of the slave did not necessarily imply a willingness to associate with or accept blacks. As Leon Litwack has observed, on the eve of war, most Republicans “denied any intention to extend political rights to free Negroes and expressed revulsion at the idea of social intercourse with them.” Indeed, few upper-class antislavery Northerners had any interaction at all with blacks, except, perhaps, as waiters. Not until 1862, after Northern aid societies responded to the critical humanitarian needs of slaves abandoned in the wake of the Union’s occupation of the Sea Islands, did a significant number of abolitionists and antislavery advocates live in close proximity to a significant number of blacks. As part of the so-called Port Royal Experiment, well-educated Northerners from wealthy families journeyed to South Carolina, charged by the federal government with the task of educating liberated slaves and employing them as free laborers. Within a few years, however, most of the men and women sent to Port Royal succumbed to what one described as the “Plantation Bitters.” Disgusted with the perceived inadequacies of the former slaves and disillusioned with attempts to prepare them for citizenship, the Yankees returned north. Placing the failings of these early ambassadors within the historiography critical of Northern efforts in the South, Willie Lee Rose entitled her definitive study of the Port Royal Experiment Rehearsal for Reconstruction.
Not all Northern teachers and plantation superintendents stationed at Port Royal and elsewhere in the former Confederacy returned home within a short period, however. Some remained in the South, interacting with former slaves long after the war ended. Historians have for the most part based their conclusions upon the many who were quick to abandon the South and its reconstruction, not the few who stayed on as members of integrated communities. More recent scholarship by Jacqueline Jones and Edward Blum, among others, which examines the experiences of Northerners who spent more than a few years in the South, revises prior assumptions regarding the immutability of the social barriers that initially separated Northern whites from Southern blacks. Through sustained interrelationships between these two groups, whites overcame prejudices and blacks learned how to trust whites, which gave rise to interracial alliances, friendships, and mutual respect. Such a finding is consistent with the “Contact Theory” developed by sociologists who have studied twentieth-century race relations. Blum has observed, for example, that whites in supervisory roles who had less personal contact with blacks had more difficulty bridging the social chasm.7

In the nineteenth century, some evangelicals, steeped in the belief that in Christ all men are “of one blood” (Acts 17:26), befriended blacks.8 Mansfield French, a Methodist minister sent by the American Missionary Association, and Solomon Peck,


his counterpart, who was dispatched by the American Baptist Home Mission Society, represented two prominent examples of the type at Port Royal. To further their goals, ministers like French and Peck, who focused on proselytizing, and teachers dedicated to educating the former slaves sought to form individual relationships with those they served. Northern plantation owners and superintendents, however, tended to view blacks in the abstract as impersonal, interchangeable factors of production; they were “the freedmen,” not individuals of any social standing. Whatever their level of direct contact, Northern businessmen were interested in blacks more as free laborers than as fellow citizens, much less than as friends. Edward Atkinson, secretary of the New England Freedmen’s Aid Society, which sponsored the Port Royal Experiment, and an investor in Southern plantations run by Yankees, admitted, “I am not very fond of negroes as such . . . as to whether the negro is inferior or not I never cared.”

Given this context, the life of Shepard Gilbert—Boston Brahmin, Copperhead Democrat, plantation owner—provides a striking testament to the potential of interracial contact, both realized and unfulfilled, during the Reconstruction era. An examination of his experiences at Port Royal deepens Blum’s groundbreaking work on the importance of sustained physical contact between blacks and whites in enhancing the opportunities for interracial rapport. At the start of the war, Gilbert was a virulent racist who was more sympathetic to Southern slave owners than to antislavery Northerners. But after spending

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years in Port Royal living amid former slaves, he forged an intimate and extraordinary relationship with a South Carolina freedman. Despite his voluminous papers at the Peabody Essex Museum’s Phillips Library, Gilbert’s significance for understanding the possibility of interracial democracy during and after Reconstruction has been totally ignored.\textsuperscript{12} This is his story.

Shep Gilbert, Harvard Class of 1863, did not really want to graduate. An only child whose father had died during his sophomore year, Shep had gathered a second family of close friends during his school years. Two members of his Harvard cohort, Joe Reed and Charlie Kemp, had also been his classmates at Boston Latin. Others included James Cole and Jack Dennett, both from Woburn, Massachusetts, and Edward “Eng” Sawtell of Fitchburg.\textsuperscript{13}

Shep and his circle often stayed up late into the night drinking brandy and discussing the great topics of the day. In 1861, no topic seemed greater than “the negro question”—namely, what, if anything, should be done with the millions of Southern slaves. Shep subscribed to polygenesis, a theory purporting a species difference between blacks and whites that ineluctably conscribed the former to servitude. His was by no means a minority view among Cambridge intellectuals. Racial theories permeated teaching of the natural and social sciences at Harvard and were widely accepted by its students, whatever their views regarding Southern slavery and secession.\textsuperscript{14} Benjamin Peirce—distinguished professor of natural philosophy,

\textsuperscript{12}The Phillips Library has no record of anyone previously accessing Gilbert’s papers, which are held among a collection of family archives that lack finding aids.

\textsuperscript{13}Charles Pickard Ware, ed., \textit{Class of ‘Sixty-Two Harvard University Fiftieth Anniversary} (Norwood, Mass.: Plimpton Press, 1912).

founder of the National Academy of Sciences, and friend of such liberal thinkers as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker—incorporated theories of racial superiority into his lectures on mathematics. “Went to Benj Peirce’s lecture 1-2,” Shep recorded on 2 January 1862. “It was mighty fine—in it he considered the intellectual deficiency of the African and hindoo races, the former making no mathematical progress at all & the latter going as far as the arithmetical form instead of by algebra as the Europeans do.”

Unsurprisingly, given his views on race, Shep had little sympathy for Southern slaves, and he considered the war to be a tragedy precipitated by extremists. Like much of Boston’s commercial elite, Shep held abolitionists in the North and secessionists in the South equally responsible for the conflict leading to the South’s attack on Fort Sumter. He had special contempt for Charles Sumner and bitterly reproved a friend for voting a Republican ticket. Unlike many of his classmates, Shep had no intention of enlisting after graduation, and he had no financial incentive to find a job.

After receiving his degree in the spring of 1862, Shep chose to remain at Harvard as a Resident Graduate, which, for the payment of five dollars, permitted him to attend undergraduate lectures. He continued to frequent his favorite haunts, often accompanied by his younger cousin Cliff Waters, but Cambridge had lost its savor after his friends Cole, Dennett, Sawtell, and Reed left aboard a military transport ship in July 1862, bound for Port Royal, a cluster of islands off of the

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16Gilbert, Diary, entries for 1861 and 1862 (box 2). For more on the anti-abolitionist sentiment among upper-class Bostonians prior to the outbreak of war, see Thomas H. O’Connor, Lords of the Loom: The Cotton Whigs and the Coming of the Civil War (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), chap. 8.
South Carolina coast. They had volunteered for a humanitarian mission behind Confederate lines.  

The previous November, Union forces had achieved a badly needed victory when they captured the strategically important Sea Islands of Port Royal Sound (known collectively as Port Royal) in a brief naval battle. For three hours, a Union fleet carrying more than twelve thousand soldiers bombarded the two poorly defended forts guarding the harbor. Rebel troops absconded for the mainland; virtually every white resident of the islands followed close on their heels. Among them were members of some of the South’s proudest families, and they were abandoning some of its most valuable plantations. Its victory offered the Union a critical naval base along the blockaded coastline stretching from Hampton Roads to Key West and an opportunity to sever the rail line between Charleston and Savannah. It also saddled the occupying army with more than eight thousand slaves in need of food and several million dollars’ worth of cotton soon in need of picking, responsibilities it had neither the expertise nor the manpower to assume.  

Northern philanthropy rushed to the assistance of Northern arms. Hastily organized Northern aid societies quickly recruited a contingent of young men and women, Shep’s friends among them, to assist Port Royal’s newly liberated slaves and to put them back to work harvesting cotton. Most of these emissaries, who became known as the “Band of Gideonites,” hailed from prominent New England families with antislavery convictions. For well-connected, recent college graduates not inclined to

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17 Gilbert, Diary, entries for 1862 (box 2), and Miscellaneous Receipts, box 4, Gilbert Papers; William J. Brigham, First Report of the Secretary of the Class of 1862 of Harvard College (Cambridge: John Wilson & Sons, 1867).

shoot or be shot at by rebels, the Port Royal mission promised great adventure in the service of a celebrated cause. Although they were civilians, the Gideonites were issued uniforms along with the authority to help administer a military occupation. Northern reporters flocked to Port Royal to tout the emissaries’ exploits to readers hungry for good news. Of the ninety-nine graduates in Harvard’s Class of 1862, thirty-four enlisted while eleven went to Port Royal as civilians. Three members of the class of 1863 joined the Port Royal mission the following year, including Shep’s cousin Cliff Waters.19

Upon learning that Charlie Kemp, the last of his school friends remaining in Cambridge, had accepted a teaching position at Port Royal, Shep began to think about going himself—not as an emissary but as an observer. He hoped to resume his former social life in a somewhat more exotic setting, and he reasoned that it would be relatively easy to find “good help” among the multitude of former slaves. At a time when accredited Gideonites struggled to gain a berth on a military steamer to Port Royal, Shep had no difficulty arranging transportation. He paid twenty dollars, almost two month’s wages for a Union army private, for a one-way passage on a ship of the Bixby & Co. line. On 29 January 1863, he departed New York for Beaufort, Port Royal’s largest city.

The day after he arrived, Shep set off on a ten-mile walk to the plantation managed by his friends Jack Dennett and Eng Sawtell. Part way into his journey, “an old darky” came along in a donkey cart and offered to carry him to the turnoff for Cedar Grove. Whatever gratitude Shep may have felt was obscured by his remarks about this “comical” race, now encountered in the flesh. On 25 February, he wrote to his mother, “I think it would kill your abolition friends if they were to discover what sort of things they have been calling ‘men & brethren.’” He added, somewhat prematurely, as circumstances would later prove, “I

19Rose, Rehearsal for Reconstruction, chap. 2; Gilbert, Diary, entries for 1862 (box 2). Two members of the class of 1862 served as plantation superintendents and subsequently enlisted. See Ware, Class of ’Sixty-Two Fiftieth Anniversary, and Arthur Lincoln, ed., Harvard College Class of 1863 25th Anniversary (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1888).
am most certainly learning more down here than I should in Cambridge.”

Dennett and Sawtell were amazed when Shep walked into the plantation house. Soon after, Charlie Kemp joined them, and the four spent hours sharing news of absent friends. Inevitably, however, the conversation turned to the impending sale of plantations that the federal government had seized for unpaid taxes, a favorite topic among the wealthy Bostonians now residing in the planters’ former homes.

Shep had little trouble imagining himself the lord of a Sea Island plantation. The antebellum planters were, after all, Southern counterparts to his own class of New England Brahmins, with whom they shared numerous commercial and social ties. No fewer than twenty-five confederates from prominent Sea Island families had attended Harvard. From the Beaufort District alone, sixteen Harvard men served in the Confederate army. To become a planter required neither a professional degree nor the work ethic of a Yankee merchant, just enough cash to purchase a deeply discounted plantation from the government.

On 11 March 1863, Joe Reed bought the two plantations he’d been superintending on Ladies Island. Shep and Jack Dennett decided to attend the land auction the following day. Shep had not come to Port Royal with any intention of staying more than a month or two, much less acquiring property. Nonetheless, he reasoned that it would be worth the trifling sums being asked just to have a place to lay his head during his Southern sojourn. And, should the North prevail in the war, he stood to make a fortune when he sold his plantation.

The next morning, Shep and Jack went to Beaufort and returned with titles to three plantations, encompassing approximately two square miles alongside the Whale Branch River, on
Port Royal Island. Jack and Eng jointly bought Cedar Grove; Shep purchased the two plantations on either side of it, Capers Place and Old House. For a total of $465, Shep became the owner of two of the largest plantations in St. Helena Parish. His cousin Cliff Waters and his parents also settled on a Port Royal plantation in the hopes of making a cotton fortune. 

Although he'd never ridden a horse before coming to the islands, Shep easily took to the life of a Southern squire. Jack and Eng agreed to manage his plantations, which they had been superintending on behalf of the government for the past year. Shep continued to live with them at Cedar Grove plantation, and while his friends worked, he often hunted or fished. The Harvard friends gathered in the evening for multicourse meals, catered by a retinue of low-paid servants. It was a good life for boys just one year out of college, very different from that of their classmates who had enlisted in the army. A Gideonite from Cambridge, Massachusetts, who dined at Cedar Grove wrote to a friend, “if you want to have all the luxuries of life, and to lead a mighty, patrician, ‘Sir Roger de Coverly’ existence, please become a lowly, self-sacrificing, and devoted missionary.”

In April 1863, Shep returned to Boston, where he remained until mid-October. It was a pattern he would follow in future years: he spent the hot months of spring and summer in Boston, much as antebellum planters had relocated to Beaufort, and went back to Port Royal in the fall. While in Boston, he resumed his former social life, passed time with his mother, and

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23A few years later, Gilbert met Gabriel Capers, the brother of his plantation’s eponymous former owner. When told how much Shep had paid for the property, Capers exclaimed, “Well that’s cheap enough for a place that cost $22,000.” Gilbert, Diary, 11–14 March 1864, and 10 June 1865 (box 2); Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, letters for February and March 1863 (box 3, folder 1); Tax Sale Certificates #51, 52, and 53, in U.S. Direct Tax Commission for South Carolina, “Tax Sale Certificates (Item 107),” in Records of the Internal Revenue Service, RG 58, 1863. For more on Northern planters in the postbellum South, see Powell, New Masters.

24Powell, New Masters, pp. 21–22.

25Gilbert, Diary, entries for March 1863 (box 2); Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 18 March 1863 (box 3, folder 1); Arthur Sumner to Nina Hartshorn, 22 November 1863, in Arthur Sumner Papers, n.d., Penn School Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.
“went to take up my dividends.” Back in the South, his diary reads like those kept by planters before the war, with the exception of his occasional reports of rebel sightings. Although the Bostonians had supplanted the planters’ social structure with one they imported from New England, its aristocratic dimensions were much the same, likewise based upon multigenerational links of kinship and commerce as well as attendance at Harvard.

Shep’s view of his field hands, whom he referred to as those “wretched niggers,” also resembled that of their former owners. Describing a fall 1863 dinner table debate, he recorded, “I defended the institution [of slavery] as divine & Dennett reprobated it. I prophecy [sic] the restoration of the negro to the state of subordination which he has through the ages occupied, while Dennett thinks the war will result in his elevation. Nous verrons.” One week later, when a drunken Union soldier who had wandered onto the plantation shot and killed a young male house servant without warning or provocation, Shep’s only response was to ensure that the killer was not a deserter.

Shep passed through 1864 and early 1865 much as he had 1863. Jack Dennett moved back to Cambridge in March, but Cole, Sawtell, and Reed remained. Shep leased his Capers Place plantation to Cole and concluded a similar deal with Reed for Old House. Most days, he arose around 10:00 a.m. and had his bath. In good weather, he hunted or rode to a neighboring

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26 Gilbert, Diary, entries for February and March of 1863 (box 2), and Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, letters for February and March 1863 and 20 December 1864 (box 3, folder 1). Among his financial papers for the period is a receipt for payment of three dollars in monthly wages to Shep’s cook, Lydia Austin (box 4).


28 Gilbert, Diary, 17 January 1865, and 30 November and 2 December 1863 (box 2).

29 Dennett matriculated at Harvard Law School but soon became bored. He returned to tour the South during 1865–66 as a special correspondent for the *Nation*. His reporting, later collected in a book entitled *The South As It Is* (New York: Viking Press, 1965) painted a vivid portrait of the economic and social changes afoot, including those witnessed by his friends still at Port Royal. See Ware, *Class of Sixty-Two Fiftieth Anniversary*, p. 20.
plantation. When it rained, he read and smoked until dinner. Occasionally, he served as a magistrate in the trial of a freedman accused of some crime, typically an alleged act of petty theft, as did all of the white men at Port Royal. The murder of a black child might go uninvestigated, much less punished, but woe betide the field hand suspected of pilfering some corn. That poor harvests curtailed the freedmen’s food supply and that white planters often fell behind in paying wages were no grounds for mercy. In his diary, Shep described a core element of his jurisprudence: “How perfectly just was the custom in the South never to admit a negro’s evidence. May those days return to this accursed land.” Meanwhile, he enjoyed the delicacies his mother, Sarah, sent from home.\textsuperscript{30}

Sarah Gilbert was a kind woman, much devoted to her extended family, in which she included Shep’s Harvard friends. She often mentioned Dennett, Cole, and Sawtell in her letters, and she expected them to call on her when they were in Boston. But Sarah Gilbert differed in one important respect from the rest of her family: she held abolitionist views and counted William Lloyd Garrison and his wife, Helen, among her friends. Throughout the months he spent at Port Royal, Shep wrote to his mother at least once a week, complaining when she failed to do the same. Into his letters, Shep poured his bile for “niggers,” the abolitionist “nigger worshippers” he “detest[ed] . . . with a bitter hatred,” and the “wretched man who occupies the White House.”\textsuperscript{31}

Shep was clearly provoking Sarah. His letters to her contain sentiments much harsher than those confided to his diary as well as more than a little condescension. “You must be taxed in order to continue a war against your Southern brethren, who are fighting for the right to govern themselves,” he wrote in one letter. In another, he requested, “And if anyone happens to ask you how I like the Freedman, I hope you will read or repeat

\textsuperscript{30}Gilbert, Diary, January–March 1864 (written on the bottoms of pages of the 1863 diary) and January 1865 (box 2); Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, letters for 12 and 29 January 1864 (box 3, folder 1).

\textsuperscript{31}Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, letters for January–March 1864 and 24 December 1864 (box 3, folder 1) and 23 January 1865 (box 3, folder 2).
to them a few extracts from this letter of mine. If the whole accursed race could be exterminated, it would be the greatest of blessings, but as it is not likely that happy circumstance will transpire, the only thing to be done is to govern them by the lash.”

In the summer of 1864, Shep again returned to New England, but this time he brought along as his servant a sixteen-year-old former slave from Capers Place named Will Middleton. Will and his large family—which included his mother, siblings, aunts, and cousins—had continued to live and work on the plantation after Shep purchased it. The trip north might well have been Will’s first time off Port Royal Island, much less outside the South, and it seems to have altered his relationship with the man who employed him. When he and Shep returned to the islands, Sarah, who had grown fond of her son’s servant, sent along presents for Will’s mother and his brother Daniel. Shep reported back to his mother: “Will already expresses a desire to be in Cambridge again, & appears at the present time to be anxious to return thither when I do.”

With the war’s end, some of Shep’s bitterness toward abolitionists, as well as his enmity toward Lincoln, faded. “Although I have never agreed with the principles which have governed Mr. L[incoln], yet he was the last man to have deserved such a fate,” he wrote when he learned that the president had been assassinated. In March 1865, Shep accepted a position as an Assistant General Superintendent of Freedmen, which gave him a place to live in Charleston and potential relief from his increasing boredom at Port Royal. Gilbert Pillsbury, who had hired Shep, either misjudged Shep’s motives or saw something in his

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32 Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, letters for 23 January and 23 March 1864 (box 3, folder 1).
33 Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 20 December 1864 (box 3, folder 1).
34 Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 27 March and 19 April 1865 (box 3, folder 2). Edward Blum discusses the effect of Lincoln’s assassination in uniting Northerners while also exposing their differing views toward Reconstruction in his Reforging the White Republic, chap. 1.
character worth developing, for he had insisted, “The agent who comes here for pastime or the mere novelty of change, had better stay at home.”

Although he had originally intended to stay for only a few weeks, Shep remained in Charleston until he returned to Cambridge, with Will Middleton in tow, in time for the annual Harvard Class Day on 23 June 1865. Pillsbury wanted him to continue in his position indefinitely, but as Shep explained, “As I am not forced to [remain in the job] pecuniarily, I don’t know why I should give up the pleasures of my Northern home [in the summer].”

Shep and Will Middleton, along with Sarah, returned to Port Royal on 13 October 1865. Shep’s mother spent two weeks in Beaufort, during which she got to know her son’s new friends, including Will Middleton’s extended family. The following year, she began a correspondence with Will, who, with Shep’s help, had learned to read and write.

In December 1868, Will wrote from Port Royal to convey to Sarah that “Aunt Martha says that if you have got little Martha a place, she is willing that she should go under your care.” One year later, Will’s brother Daniel went to Boston, provided with a ticket and warm clothing paid for by Shep. Sarah Gilbert watched after the young man, frequenting the restaurants where he worked, inviting him to her home, and reminding him to send letters back to his family in South Carolina. Another Middleton, Thomas, also came to Boston. Sarah, who became something of a surrogate parent to the Middleton boys, offered them advice, news from Port Royal, and, occasionally, money. In 1877, she informed Will that his brother Daniel had married a white Irish girl who worked as a laundress in Boston.

36 Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, letters for May–August 1865 (box 3, folder 2).
37 Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 14 October 1865 (box 3, folder 2); William Middleton to Sarah Gilbert, 6 September 1866 (box 6, folder 5).
38 Middleton to Sarah Gilbert, 17 December 1868 (box 6, folder 5), Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 11 May 1869 (box 3, folder 3), and Sarah to Shepard Gilbert, 14 June
the interracial marriage may have shocked Daniel’s Sea Island family, as Sydney Nathan notes, “in Boston, by the 1870s, fully 38 percent of all men designated as ‘mulatto’ by the federal census had married women designated as ‘white.’”

In 1866, Shep began to take charge of Capers Place, replacing James Cole, whose management of the plantation had not been successful. Shep negotiated an agreement with the field hands, whose continued residence in their long-time homes depended upon their continued employment at Capers Place. As rent, they would give Shep the first one hundred pounds of cotton raised on each acre. Soon it was obvious that the arrangement was financially untenable for the field hands. In the antebellum years, area plantations had yielded seventy-five pounds of cotton per acre in an average year, and 1866 proved to be far below average, with drought and caterpillars ravaging the crop.

A Philadelphia man succeeded Joe Reed in leasing Old House, but after two disastrous years raising cotton, he had no wish to attempt a third. Shep was now saddled with two plantations, and 1867 was another bad year for Sea Island cotton. Most of the Northern men who had bought plantations lost money, and many left the islands for good. Land values plummeted. In 1868, Shep advertised his two plantations for sale or lease, but he had no takers. He never again mentioned Old House in either his diaries or his letters. Shep may have sold or rented parcels of his land to the resident freedmen for a nominal price. Most Northerners who had bought confiscated

1876 and 18 April 1877 (box 6, folder 3). In a study of black migration from the Sea Islands, Clyde Vernon Kiser notes that more than a few former slaves moved to the Boston area under the employment or sponsorship of Northerners who had lived at Port Royal (Sea Island to City: A Study of St. Helena Islanders in Harlem and Other Urban Centers [New York: Atheneum, 1969]).


Sea Island plantations either did the same or forfeited their land for money owed.\textsuperscript{41}

Shep’s relationships with blacks on his plantations, the Middletons in particular, continued to evolve as they themselves became landowners and as his Harvard friends scattered. Eng Sawtell and Charlie Kemp moved back to Massachusetts in 1869. In letters to his mother, Shep rarely mentioned Joe Reed or James Cole, who remained at Port Royal but lived on another island. When, in 1870, Will announced his intention to marry, Shep agreed to host the nuptials at his house as soon as his mother arrived from Boston. Although Shep explained his generosity by noting that Will “has been a useful, and above all honest servant for all these years,” the Middletons had by this point essentially replaced his absent Harvard friends.\textsuperscript{42}

At the same time, Shep’s finances were deteriorating. Late in 1868, he ran successfully for a position on the Beaufort township board of selectmen, which he noted “will bring me in $1.50 pr. day beside the honor.” He campaigned to become a representative to the South Carolina General Assembly—a job that paid $6.00 per day—but lost to a former plantation superintendent from Rhode Island. He began studying law in hope of being appointed a magistrate.\textsuperscript{43} As Lawrence Powell has noted, few of the men who would be called carpetbaggers came to the South with politics in mind. Most, like Shep, became active in Republican circles because they wanted to stay in the South


\textsuperscript{42}Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 12 April 1869 and January–May 1869 (quotation from 2 April 1870 letter) (box 3, folder 3).

\textsuperscript{43}Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 27 December 1868 (box 3, folder 2) and 5 January and 2 May 1869 (box 3, folder 3), and Diary, 4 and 6 January 1869 (box 2). During the years of military occupation, virtually all white men at Port Royal served as temporary magistrates for single trials. After the war, the office of magistrate returned to being a gubernatorial appointment.
but, after their business ventures failed, needed to make a living.\textsuperscript{44}

The next few years appear to have been uneventful for Shep. He kept no diary after 1869, and wrote far fewer letters to his mother. Many of those he did write say as much about the lives of the Middletons as they do about his own. When he scribbled on the bottom of one, “P.S. I saw all the children yest,” Sarah understood that he meant Will’s children. Perhaps the most significant event for Shep during this period occurred on 11 June 1871. On a pleasure excursion from Beaufort to Charleston and back, he took notice of someone with whom he began a romantic relationship—one he did not disclose to his mother until two years later. The object of his attraction was a man named Robert Barnes.\textsuperscript{45}

In January 1872, Shep accepted a job working as a clerk for George Holmes, a New Yorker who held the office of county treasurer, and moved into rented rooms in Beaufort. In September he, who had castigated a classmate for voting Republican, was chosen as a delegate to that party’s county convention. In a telling indicator of the prevailing political climate, so was Will Middleton. Shep wrote to his mother,

\begin{quote}
Down here, politics are all the go. Smalls [a former slave] running for State Senator against Whipper [a black lawyer originally from Pennsylvania]. If Whipper should be elected, I dare say he could afford to buy my plantation; but, on the other hand, if Smalls is elected, I have been promised the position of County Auditor—a situation worth about $1500 a year. So, I am placed in a dilemma.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

In the next year, Shep worked several jobs. In addition to clerking for Holmes, he assisted him in collecting taxes.


\textsuperscript{45}Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 1869–70 (box 3, folder 3) and 1871 (box 3, folder 4). Shep mentions the excursion in a letter dated 11 June 1871 (a comment added in 1880 notes that on this occasion, he first saw Robert Barnes and “saw the children” in a letter dated 22 October 1872) (box 3, folder 4).

\textsuperscript{46}Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 3 January, 22 September, and 14 October 1872 (box 3, folder 4). A campaign flyer preserved in his scrapbook (box 11) indicates that in 1869, Shep had run for the state assembly on the Union Republican ticket.
Although not made an auditor, as he had bragged to his mother that he would be, he was hired to do office work for the newly elected Senator Smalls, and he served as a notary public. His various sources of income did not, however, cover his living expenses, even though his room and board in town were half the expense of maintaining a household at Capers Place. Sarah sent what money she could, but the investments upon which she depended declined in value as the nation entered a prolonged, financial depression. Will Middleton also had trouble making ends meet as an independent farmer. Shep persuaded Holmes to give Will a job, and the former servant and his former master went door-to-door collecting taxes.47

Shep had yet to mention his friend Bob Barnes in his letters to his mother. He did write in September 1873 of accompanying a local team to Charleston to serve as game “scorer,” but he did not reveal that Bob was the captain of the Dauntless Baseball Club. Sarah knew nothing of her son’s new friend when she arrived in Beaufort in October.48

Shep’s mother remained in Beaufort for the next seven months. Since no record of that visit exists, we can only assume that she spent time with the Middleton clan as well Shep’s new friends within the community of Northern transplants living in Beaufort. She also presumably met Robert Barnes, for in the first letter he sent his mother after she returned home, Shep enclosed a picture of Bob—a handsome, twenty-year-old mulatto.49

47 Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 22 October 1872 and January–May 1873 (box 3, folder 4); Sarah to Shepard Gilbert, 7 January and August–September 1873 (box 6, folder 1).
48 Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 26 September 1873 (box 3, folder 4); Sarah to Shepard Gilbert, 18 October 1873 (box 6, folder 1), and Diary, 5 October 1875 (box 2).
49 Sarah to Shepard Gilbert, 15 June 1874 (box 6, folder 1), and Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 20 June 1874 (box 3, folder 5); U.S. Census Office, Tenth Census of the United States: Census of Population and Housing, microform, vol. T9, National Archives Microfilm Publications (Washington, D.C.: National Archive and Records Service, 1880), 23A, Enumeration District 041. As is common with former slaves, the decennial census reports show some inconsistencies regarding Barnes’s birth date and race. The 1900 census listed him as a fifty-year-old black man, indicating that he would have been twenty-four in 1874. Unfortunately the image of Barnes is no longer extant.
Years of living in Beaufort and participating in its racially integrated, exclusively Republican political culture had significantly altered Shep. He had long since dispensed with vituperative references to “wretched niggers” and encomiums to slavery; now he interacted with blacks as friends, colleagues, and—in Senator Smalls’s case—as an underling. Shep paid Will Middleton and Bob Barnes to do odd jobs, but he did not consider them his employees but, rather, his friends. In the twelve months after his mother returned to Boston, Shep declined invitations to visit his Waters cousins, claiming that he was too busy with work; but on several occasions, he drove out to spend time with the Middletons. At the end of October 1874, even as he struggled to pay his rent (Sarah had had to sell shares in a depressed market to prevent his eviction in June), Shep helped Bob and his older brother furnish the barbershop they were opening.

Shep’s financial prospects improved at the end of 1874 when he ran for school commissioner on a Republican ticket headed by gubernatorial candidate Daniel Henry Chamberlain, a fellow Massachusetts native who had served as an officer in a black regiment after attending Harvard Law School. Both men won. Sarah, who had recently sent Shep another badly needed one hundred dollars, noted with relief that his new office would guarantee “sure pay.”

After a five-year lapse, Shep resumed keeping a diary in 1875. It records the life of a minor government functionary who attended meetings at a fraternal lodge and participated in amateur theatricals. Often, he stopped by the offices of the Beaufort Tribune, for which he occasionally wrote editorials, or one of the local stores to talk politics with other transplanted Northern men, many of them former abolitionists, who were promoting Port Royal as a commercial capital of the New South.51 On rare

50 Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 12 July, 27 October, and 23 November 1874 (box 3, folder 5), and Sarah to Shepard Gilbert, 26 June and 4 December 1874 (box 6, folder 1).

51 Gilbert, Diary, entries for 1875 (box 3); Gilbert, Scrapbook, articles written for Beaufort Republican (box 11); Atlanta journalist Henry W. Grady—most famously in a speech delivered to the New England Society in 1886—popularized the term “New South,” which referred to aspirations for the region’s economic and social
occasions, he saw James Cole or Joe Reed, who alone among his classmates remained in the islands.\textsuperscript{52} His closest friend and almost constant companion was Bob Barnes. Together, they attended social events, went on fishing trips, and shared Shep’s bed.\textsuperscript{53}

Romantic friendship between two men was neither exceptional nor stigmatized in Victorian America, which tended to show greater tolerance for such unions than for premarital heterosexual relationships between members of the same social class.\textsuperscript{54} Bob Barnes’s race, not his gender, made his intimacy with Shep extraordinary. Together, they socialized with members of both races. In April, as Shep began to anticipate his summer visit to New England, he wrote to his mother, “I shall hope to take Robert on with me, for he is one who would appreciate all the novelties at the North—he is quite a musician, you know, and plays the violincello at parties here in town.”\textsuperscript{55}


\textsuperscript{52}James Gillman Cole lived on Ladies Island until his death in 1904. Joseph Sampson Reed continued to live on his Ladies Island plantation and at Beaufort until he died in 1897. At the time of his death, Reed was the treasurer of Beaufort County. See Ware, Class of ’Sixty-Two Fiftieth Anniversary, pp. 18, 61.

\textsuperscript{53}Gilbert, Diary, entries for 1875.


\textsuperscript{55}Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 7 April 1875 (box 3, folder 5).
he transcribed a few stanzas of Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 147,” in which the poet speaks of lust overcoming his reason, leading him to an unhealthy and unrequited love. When Bob failed to return the following day, Shep again departed from his custom of blandly recording the day’s weather and activities to indulge the pain of a lover scorned.56

Two days later, Bob appeared. He had, he explained, made an unexpected trip to Charleston to transport a Miss Berry back to Beaufort. Relieved that he had misjudged Bob, Shep celebrated by ordering two expensive new suits of clothing from a Liverpool tailor: one for himself; the other, a gift for Bob. At Christmas, Shep noted, “The only present I had was a nice neck scarf from Bob.” He did not realize that for some time he had been sharing Bob’s affections with Selina Berry, the Miss Berry whom Bob had accompanied home from Charleston during his absence.57

One might expect that Shep’s discovery of Bob and Selina’s relationship would have produced a despair akin to that he suffered when Bob had mysteriously left town. It did not. Men of Shep’s background not uncommonly formed intimate male friendships during the emotionally tenuous transition from boy to man, the years of exile between the comfort of a parental home and the establishment of one’s own household. But such romantic friendships were understood to be transitory, and the marriage of one party represented not so much an abandonment of the other as a graduation to the next stage of life. The friendship may have lost its sexual intimacy, but it did not necessarily end. Walt Whitman attended the wedding of one such companion, and he befriended the wife of another.58 And so it was between Shep and the newly married Bob and Selina Barnes.

In April 1876, Shep began to think of traveling north for the summer. He wrote his mother that Bob had recently married

56Gilbert, Diary, 28 and 29 August 1875 (box 2).
57Gilbert, Diary, 31 August, 3 September, and 31 December 1875 (box 3), and Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 10 April 1876 (box 3, folder 5).
after a lengthy engagement, and she conveyed her relief that the relationship had ended, for she had worried how Bob would have been received. Sarah was now living in what had been her father’s house in Salem, which she shared with her sister’s family, the Waterses. The house would be filled with Shep’s cousins, all home for a visit, and Sarah could not imagine any of them consenting to share a bedroom with Robert Barnes.

Shep hurried to correct Sarah. “I want you to turn again to my last letter and see what could have given you the impression that Bob had left me, or that I had parted with him on his being married. You will not find that I wrote anything of the kind,” he chided her in a letter dated 9 May 1876. Bob still wished to see the North, and Shep did not intend to disappoint him. As for how space might be found for him at night, Shep had a convenient, if not altogether truthful, reply. “When we have been to Charleston or Columbia together, he has slept in the same bed with me, for I got used to that when I was sick in the Club House [Shep’s rooming house in Beaufort] while you were down here. Do not be afraid but what we can arrange it nicely.”

Sarah quickly put aside any misgivings she might have harbored about Bob’s impending visit. “How I long for the time to arrive for your arrival, you & Boby, & then I shall invite Thomas [Middleton, working as a waiter in Boston] down to see Robert,” Sarah wrote on 14 June 1876. She closed with “love to Robert.”

Shep and Bob set off for Boston on 22 July 1876, after making a brief stop in Savannah. They did not return to Beaufort until the end of November. Three months in the North was transformative for Bob, a former slave who had never been out of the South. He toured the mountains of New Hampshire, staying in the resorts frequented by Shep and Sarah. He marched in a Salem political procession for the Republican presidential

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59 Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 10 April 1876 and 9 May 1876 (box 3, folder 5); Sarah to Shepard Gilbert, 4 May 1876 (box 6, folder 3).
60 Sarah to Shepard Gilbert, 14 June 1876 (box 6, folder 3).
ticket of Hayes and Wheeler. The able musician also supplemented his repertoire of Negro spirituals and minstrel numbers with hymns learned during his visit.

On the evening of 24 January 1877, Bob organized a performance at the Methodist Church of a group he named the Beaufort Oratorio Society, which included Selina and her brother Fred. Shep noted with pride, “All of the officers and their wives from the fleet [of visiting navy ships] attended and thought it was very good.” He sent a copy of the program to Sarah, who showed it to friends and relatives who had met Bob in Salem. Sarah wrote to Shep that his Aunt Mary Ellen had gushed, “I’m proud of Bob . . . to benefit so much by improving in Salem as to give a concert after returning back South & only regret I could not have been present down there.” Sarah reported that Aunt Mary Ellen “sends her love to both of you” and concluded with her own “love to Bob.”

As Bob settled into married life, Shep began to pursue a career. His patchwork of clerkships and minor elected offices provided neither an adequate income nor sufficient stimulation. “I long for some more active employment,” Shep confessed to his diary. His independent study of the law bore fruit on 5 February 1877 when he was admitted to the South Carolina bar. One of his first clients was Will Middleton, whom he helped with a real estate transaction. Another was Robert Smalls, the state senator, who hired Shep to take depositions in a court case contesting his victory in the 1876 U.S. House race. Small’s opponent, a Democrat from a prominent Southern family, whom Shep described as “a gambler and a murderer,” had sued to overturn the election results. Although the congressional district contained more than twice as many blacks of voting age as whites, Smalls’s opponent claimed that voter intimidation by Republicans had caused his narrow loss. Representing Smalls put Shep in the previously unthinkable position of backing a former slave over a fellow white, Harvard graduate

Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 22 July, 23 August, and 1 December 1876 (box 3, folder 5); 25 January and 9 March 1877 and 5 April 1878 (box 3, folder 6); Diary, 24 January 1877 (box 2); and Sarah to Shepard Gilbert, 17 February 1877 (box 6, folder 3).
for a prestigious public office. Shep subpoenaed witnesses and gathered 129 pages of testimony in support of Smalls’s successful case. Smalls became a social as well as a business acquaintance. Shep called upon the congressman at his home and attended the wedding of his daughter. In the topsy-turvy reality of Reconstruction Beaufort, Smalls had purchased the Prince Street mansion where he had formerly lived as a slave, and he hosted its—and his—former owner for a visit in 1875. In such a context, it seems less remarkable that Shep, who had previously favored Negro slavery, would accept Smalls’s patronage and hospitality.

And Shep’s friendship with Bob persisted. He frequently visited the Barneses’ home, sometimes joining with the Beaufort Oratorio for an evening of song. When Selina’s father died in March 1877, Shep made the funeral arrangements and wrote the death notices. He was delighted when Selina gave birth to a daughter and grief stricken when the baby died a few days afterward. “I went up and saw it as it lay embowered in flowers, and having Bob’s complexion, it also seemed to be his image, with quite a growth of soft curly down on its little head,” he wrote to his mother. Sarah reacted as though she had lost a granddaughter. She told Shep, “You don’t know how I deplore its death. I had calculated to do a great deal for it.” A few years later, in 1879, Bob and Selina had a son who was christened, with Shep in attendance, Robert Joseph Gilbert Barnes.


63 Diary, 27 January, 5 February, 28 March, and 24 April 1877 (box 2); Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 9 February, 1 and 9 April 1877 and 11 November 1878 (box 6, folder 3); and Okon Uya, *From Slavery to Public Service* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 37.

64 Diary, 16 March and 11 July 1877 (box 3); Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 28 August 1877 and 4 June 1879 (box 3, folder 6); and Sarah to Shepard Gilbert, 2 September 1877 (box 6, folder 3).
Sarah Gilbert’s health began to fail in 1879. Her sister, with whom she shared the Salem house, died in March, and Sarah began to anticipate her own demise. She had recorded her last wishes, which called for her clothing to be divided between the wives of Will Middleton and Bob Barnes after her death, and she pleaded with Shep to return home in time for a last visit. Shep did not immediately comply, and then in August, he found himself comforting Bob. Pestilence was a regular summer visitor to the Sea Islands, and that year, it claimed the lives of Selina Barnes and her young son. In October, a grieving Robert Barnes received a commission as a third lieutenant in the South Carolina National Guard. In December, Shep left for Massachusetts to be with his ailing mother.

Shep arrived to find the family home a hospice, with both his mother and his cancer-stricken Uncle Waters dying, and for the next month, he helped care for them. A few times a week, he received visits from his mother’s neighbor, Mrs. Mary Emilio, often accompanied by her twenty-one year-old daughter, Clara. Sarah Gilbert died on 20 January 1880. Shep began a lengthy process of settling his mother’s affairs and coming to terms with her loss. He read through her old letters and occasionally slept in her bed. And he thought of Bob. On 22 January, he wrote in his diary, “Mrs. Lowry was in today to mend a chair and said that Mother often spoke of Bob.” Five days later, he recorded, “Had a dream in which Bob seemed to be far gone in consumption & I felt he was not going to last long, & a sea captain standing by said he could have a stateroom on his steamer to make a voyage.” It seems as though one traumatic loss had caused Shep to anticipate another.

Bob had Shep in his thoughts as well. Not long after Sarah’s obituary appeared in the Beaufort Tribune, Bob wrote to Shep saying he wanted to join him in Massachusetts. Shep hesitated

65 Sarah to Shepard Gilbert, 11 August 1878 and 5 March and 17 April 1879 (box 3, folder 6); Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 23 August 1879 (box 3, folder 6); and Diary, 1 October (newspaper clipping) and 17 December 1879 (box 2). The cause of death for Bob Barnes’s wife and son was not recorded, but it was likely yellow fever.

66 Gilbert, Diary, entries for December 1879–January 1880 (box 3).
to reply. His future was uncertain. As he gradually emerged from the depths of his loss, however, he began to spend more time with the close-knit Emilio family. On 15 March, Shep sent Bob ten dollars by postal order, but he said nothing of his returning south or Bob coming north. He continued to live in the old family home in Salem, helping his cousins, Cliff and Stanley, care for their father, while working to reconcile his mother’s finances.

By the third week of May, both tasks had come to an end. His Uncle Waters died on 20 April 1880, and within the month that followed, Shep settled his mother’s estate, including her one-fourth interest in the Salem home. At this point, Shep had neither work nor family obligations and no permanent address beyond some rented rooms in Beaufort. He could, if he wished, go back to his former life with Bob, in Beaufort or anywhere else. But the time had come for Shepard Gilbert to enter a new phase of life. On 28 May 1880, just before returning to his own home after another evening with his neighbors, Shep proposed marriage to Clara Emilio. Soon after, Clara’s mother informed a relative:

Our Clara is engaged to be married to Mr. Shepard Devereux Gilbert, a nephew of Miss Devereux, whose mother died at the Waters’ in January of this year. He is an orphan of thirty-eight summers, without brothers or sisters or any encumbrance whatever, a lawyer by profession though he has not practiced much as he does not seem to be obliged to. . . . Since Mrs. Gilbert died he has been very attentive to Clara, why, perfectly devoted, and at an almost too early date, he offered himself to her, and it is just about a week that they are engaged and happy enough they seem. She is his first love, he says.

In June 1880, Shep returned to South Carolina to gather his belongings and say his good-byes. Bob helped him pack.
He spent one month in Beaufort visiting his friends, black and white. In accordance with his mother’s last wishes, he delivered her dresses to Will Middleton’s wife. And just before leaving Beaufort, Shep saw Bob Barnes married to Mary Berry, his late wife’s younger sister. The death of Shep’s mother had brought an end to his journey of discovery and, in many respects, his youth. He returned north, this time for good, having embraced the commitments of maturity. But while Shep put aside the romantic friendship of his youth, it had profoundly determined the man he had become. As Melville’s Ishmael remarked after sharing a bed with Queequeg, “How elastic our stiff prejudices grow when love once comes to bend them.”

Shep spent the rest of his working life first as a lawyer and then as the editor of a trade journal for printers. At the time

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69 Gilbert, Diary, entries for June–August 1880 (box 3); Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (1851; Boston: St. Botolph Society, 1922), p. 56.
of his death in 1927, he and Clara were living just one block from his old family home in Salem. Shep never again served in public office, never had children, and never attracted much attention. In 1904, he placed a clipping in his scrapbook, one of the few news accounts to record his name after he left South Carolina. It reported an anniversary meeting of the Sumner Guards, a fraternal organization of black men who had served the Union during the Civil War. “The day was rendered memorable,” the article stated, “by the presentation of a beautiful engraving of the lamented Charles Sumner, a gift from Mr. S. D. Gilbert.” That same year, Bob Barnes, with whom Shep had corresponded for decades, traveled from South Carolina to spend the summer with Shep and Clara.70

Shep Gilbert exhibited many of the character flaws that have been attributed to Northern transplants in the Reconstruction South. His attitude toward blacks was marked by repugnance at his worst and, at his best, racist paternalism. He came to Port Royal with little interest in religion and little tolerance for abolitionists. His attraction to Republican politics stemmed from financial need, not commitment. And yet, despite his deep-seated prejudices, Shepard Gilbert received a civics education in the South, amid the era’s unbridled scramble for money and political power, that he would never have received in the North. In Beaufort, as perhaps nowhere else during Shep’s lifetime, whites lived for an extended period as a minority within

a community where blacks voted and owned property. In such a place, self-interest required racial harmony. Yet only by repeatedly brushing against each other socially, only in a sustained “contact of human souls,” could a white man born to privilege and a black man born to slavery establish their common humanity and a life-long friendship. Few communities, North or South, would afford similar opportunities during the century in which Reconstruction faded into a distorted memory of failure and corruption.

In the heart of the Old South, Shep Gilbert underwent, quite literally, a radical transformation from a man who supported slavery into one who advocated for black citizenship. Through his participation in Republican politics, his legal work for Robert Smalls, and evidence that he contributed to the press on behalf of the laboring class, Shep championed Southern blacks’ rights to political representation. On a personal level, he taught his black friends to read, loaned them money to start businesses, and helped them relocate to the North as they emerged from slavery and reached toward a better life. During his early years at Port Royal, Shep had scorned Laura Towne, a Gideonite passionately dedicated to educating black Sea Islanders; a little more than a decade later, he was her friend and collaborator as Beaufort schools commissioner. Although Shep never considered blacks—nor, for that matter, the majority of white Americans—his equals, he socialized easily with them. In the end, Shep’s sustained contact with Port Royal’s African Americans, more so than his social pedigree or Harvard education, determined his views regarding race and citizenship in a reconstructed Union.

72 Gilbert pasted editorials into his scrapbook but, because they are unsigned, it cannot be substantiated that he wrote them. He did mention in his diary of 26 January 1877 (box 3), however, that he had written an editorial against landowners forcing their laborers to vote as they directed. In addition, he wrote to his mother on 28 April 1876 (box 3, folder 5) that he had written articles for the paper that had no bylines.
73 Shepard to Sarah Gilbert, 10 January 1875 (box 3, folder 5), and Sarah to Shepard, 14 January 1875 (box 6, folder 2).
Robert Mann is currently working on a book that follows how the business and social interactions of four white men from Massachusetts and two former slaves living in Reconstruction South Carolina changed their respective views regarding race and citizenship. This article has been drawn from that work. He is a Suzanne and Caleb Loring Fellow of the Massachusetts Historical Society and the Boston Athenaeum for 2015–16.