

“When I Get My Axe”: Military Service and Visions of Community
in Refugee Camps of the American Civil War

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ABSTRACT:

This paper seeks to complicate histories of emancipation that connect black military service to refugees' freedom and citizenship. Diverging from the frequent narrative of this period, this essay seeks to divorce our celebration of emancipation from its association with the path to citizenship on a military route. While it is indisputable that black military service was pivotal in turning northern white public opinion toward acceptance of black emancipation and citizenship, its emphasis in the scholarly literature obscures the desires and understandings of many, if not most, southern blacks themselves. In Civil War refugee camp records, the inhabitants make eloquent appeals resisting Union impressment, yet these voices have been greatly diminished in the dominant historical literature. As one Virginia camp resident put it as he resisted military recruitment: “I think I'm making the best soldier now, sir or shall be when I get my axe,” the man said, inverting the image of a weapon to mean a tool for building a house. The most pressing concern of so many former slaves was home and family. Rather than creating a solution for the refugees, the advent of black military recruiting was a trauma, upsetting family reunions and making claims to land and subsistence more tenuous. This paper intends to measure the cost of military service and to hear the alternative scenarios refugees themselves proposed. It further investigates the contests over women's labor and moral authority as black women negotiated their own way outside of claims as “soldiers' wives.”

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“Well, my men how would you like to be soldiers? To go into the army?” a Union doctor and newly donned Colonel asked a lineup of potential recruits in the tidewater Virginia area in March 1863. The men had just spent four weeks sowing seeds of subsistence crops on government farms around Fort Monroe, each man his own separate patch, while women and children worked on nearby Craney Island, sewing uniforms and going to school, wives joining their husbands in the field if shoes became available for them. The next step was to make the government farm into the family’s patch. The doctor paused the work that day to bring in the men to “test [famed Massachusetts abolitionist] Governor Andrew’s chance of success in his rumored soldier-hunting tour” (the hunting metaphor in time would be all too real). The men’s reply to the doctor’s question was recorded by a teacher witnessing the scene: “A low murmuring grunt of distaste accompanied by a slight restless shuffle was the response.” The answer came: ““I think I’m making the best soldier now, sir, or shall be when I get my axe,’ said one man, his head rising with every word...” He couched his resistance to military service in terms of duty rather than evasion of duty. “Each man takes his family and in so doing, assumes the responsibility of its support,” the teacher added to her account. With an axe rather than a gun, he could build his family a house. The new black recruitment effort threatened to unravel these plans.¹

His reply betrayed not pacificism or cowardice or political naïveté but rather an acute understanding of what that gun meant. It was not in this case a tool for his own emancipation or his families’ protection. Male slaves did embrace the opportunity to hold a Union gun if it was to guard the camps where their families dwelled. Slaves threatened by guerilla attacks enlisted

¹ *Dear Ones at Home: Letters from Contraband Camps*. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1966): 51-52.

and formed guerilla groups of their own—many only nominally Union—to liberate, protect, or seek justice for their communities.² Slaves in Union-occupied but Emancipation-exempted areas of high slaveholder Union loyalty enthusiastically chose to take up the gun when it directly freed them, abruptly stopped when the Union failed to give shelter to their families, and just as quickly rushed back when Congress authorized the freedom of the families of enlisted men.³ But that was not the case for this Virginia man.⁴

The Union gun was not in his case a symbol of rebellion against the slaveholder who might believe like Confederate General Howell Cobb that “[i]f slaves will make good soldiers, our whole theory of slavery is wrong.”⁵ It was not for this man an instrument “of unspeakable value” as preparation for the life of a citizen, mustering him into “the best school in the world,” turning a “shuffling gait into... an erect carriage, ...it makes men of them at once,” as abolitionist Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson bragged of his First South Carolina Volunteers.⁶ It was not on this occasion even a clear sign that “the stern logic of events” necessitating black military service “has determined the interests of the country as identical with and inseparable from those of the Negro,” and should naturally lead to enfranchisement and equality, as Frederick Douglass would argue.⁷ And it was not because this man was too politically isolated to be thinking about symbols of and choices to secure freedom; in the wartime refugee camps discussions of freedom reached fever pitch and imagined plans for *lived* freedom took root. He simply chose the axe as a different symbol, a different “weapon” against slavery that he thought a better guarantee of a

² It should also be noted in accordance with my commitment to showing the rifts as well as the solidarities within the black communities in the South that many black guerilla bands formed in the wake of Union recruitment with the purpose of kidnapping and impressing black men into the service, these bands reaping a recruiting bonus for their own personal financial reward. See Ira Berlin, et al, eds. *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Volume I, Series II: The Black Military Experience* (Cambridge: 1982), Chapter 2.

³ See Berlin, *Freedom Series: Black Military Experience*, Introduction. Kentucky is of course the most striking example of this.

⁴ Virginia was the site of a few significant Emancipation Proclamation-exempted areas in the tidewater region, however, including York, Elizabeth City, Norfolk, and Princess Anne counties.

⁵ As quoted in Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power And Politics In The Civil War South*. (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 352.

⁶ Thomas Wentworth Higginson at Beaufort, SC, Testimony before American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, O-328 1863, Letters Received, entry 12, RG 94, *National Archives*.

⁷ Frederick Douglass, “Reconstruction” in *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 18., 1866 in *Selected Writings and Speeches*, 596.

more permanent freedom. The Union gun, with its attendant three-year contract, was not necessary for him to secure his family's separation from the master, but it would guarantee his family's separation from him.

This essay takes his choice seriously. And it looks at others like it in the moment and the process of emancipation across the Union-occupied American South during the Civil War. It resists looking backward from freedom and citizenship with a sense of inevitability and teleology. It tries to understand what refugee slaves imagined for themselves at the moment when the master-servant relationship seemed to have been rent asunder, perhaps never to be rehabilitated. It looks carefully at the contexts, contingencies, strategies, and protests of slaves themselves. Its main sites of analysis are the refugee camps of the Civil War and their surrounding farms. Roughly a quarter of a million slaves came into these refugee camps; a quarter million more into Union-secured territory over the course of the war.⁸ The first slaves granted protection behind Union lines, considered "contraband property of war," came in May 1861, hardly a month after Sumter; the first black regiments were rounded up a year later in April 1862. And though a Congressional Militia Act of July 1862 authorizing black garrisons moved the black enlistment effort forward, it was really the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863 that set in motion a national recruiting effort to enlist southern black men to fill army quotas.⁹ In the end, roughly 179,000 blacks served in the Union army; 150,000 of those had been enslaved at the time of enlistment.¹⁰

⁸ Louis Gerteis, *From Contraband to Freedman: Federal Policy Toward Southern Blacks, 1861-1865* (CT: 1973), 193. Patricia Click, *Time Full of Trial: the Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony, 1862-1867*. (Chapel Hill, 2001), 2.

⁹ In May 1863, General Orders No. 143 standardized recruitment of black soldiers and centralized their control in the Bureau of Colored Troops under the adjutant general.

¹⁰ See <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war/> (Accessed February 1, 2012). There were 19,000 in the navy (the navy started accepting black sailors at the very start of the war). The recruitment effort that allowed northern recruiters to apply the impressment of "unemployed" southern blacks to their states' quotas began in the beginning of 1864. A note on terms: I use a number of terms in this paper—"contraband," "refugee," "slave,"—but all of these terms are notably ambiguous. I use the term "slaves" because most of the people in this story are not yet legally free or their legal status is precarious. "Freedpeople" reads history backwards and minimizes the uncertainty of the period under review. In my study, I use "refugee" rather than "contraband," but even this can be misleading as some did not leave their masters but

This service deserves recognition. It compelled a national conversation that convinced more white northerners to view emancipation as a necessary turning point to save the Union. It moved Lincoln to write in his defense of the Emancipation Proclamation: “You say you will not fight to free negroes. Some of them seem willing to fight for you . . . If they stake their lives for us, they must be prompted by the strongest motive—even the promise of freedom. And the promise being made, must be kept.”¹¹ And in interviews with former slave soldiers after the war, it made the Civil War in the end a “black man’s war,” creating an etiology of black valor and national salvation. As former slave veteran Cornelius Gardner narrated it for his black interviewer: “Frederick Douglass told Abe Lincoln, 'Give the black man guns and let him fight.' And Abe Lincoln say, 'If I give him a gun, when it come to battle he might run.' And Frederick Douglass say, 'Try him, and you'll win the war.' And Abe said, 'All right, I'll try him.’” Gardner was not sheepish in expressing what he thought his service did for his race: “Did I fight in the War? Well if I hadn't you wouldn't be sittin' there writin' at me today.”¹² Black male military service stands in a post-Civil Rights Civil War narrative as a central causal factor in the liberation of four million slaves and the preservation of the nation. It is difficult not to be sanguine about that. This paper seeks not to detract from the feat of black servicemen (whether they were enthusiastic conscripts or not) but to complicate the easy equation of the Union gun with slave politicization and to begin to look carefully at what the emphasis on that story in both the scholarly and popular literature, heightened by the recent sesquicentennial celebration, has obscured.

rather were left. The most accurate labels for the actors I speak of in this story are “daughter,” “mother,” “brother,” “father,” etc. I suggest that they understood more about their identity in relation to each other than they did in their relation to legal distinctions.

¹¹ Abraham Lincoln to James C. Conkling, August 26, 1863, *The Essential Lincoln: Speeches and Correspondence* (NY: 2009), 23.

¹² For “black man’s war,” see interview with Harry Jarvis in John W. Blassingame, *Slave testimony: two centuries of letters, speeches, interviews, and autobiographies*. (LSU Press, 1977), 606-624. For Frederick Douglass-Abraham Lincoln story, see Cornelius Gardner, WPA narrative (Norfolk, VA), in George P. Rawick, *The American slave: a composite autobiography*. (Greenwood Pub. Co., 1974).

By turning to historical accounts from the contraband camps, I hope to illuminate three related points that the primacy of the Civil War soldier-to-citizen paradigm has overshadowed. First, slaves' first allegiance was to family and community over Union and country. The Union was still a slaveholding nation, and slaves' loyalty to and relationship with the Union was something to be negotiated rather than assumed as a natural consequence of their resistance to slavery. Many understood like one Louisiana slave "there are three classes with three distinct desires, Union, Confederate, and Negro."¹³ Slaves exploited opportunities that a Union presence held out, but the aims of refugee slaves and the Union army were not only in uneasy tension, the army often made the choice a zero-sum game. Practically speaking, for many slaves faced with enlistment, it was family *or* Union. Military service more often disrupted and destabilized family reunions than it aided them. The path to citizenship and recognition of rights as a reward of military service could seem an immaterial or even ephemeral promise, and when it was discussed by the promoters of the cause, the emphasis was on responsibility rather than rights, preparedness rather than protection. When scholars read claims of citizenship and a desire for liberal individualism back into the literature, they overlook the process by which slaves came to remake their relationships and allegiances and they presume progress the more slaves cast their lot with the state.¹⁴ I shift the focus first to the relationships they forged with each other and then to the strategies they employed negotiating a relationship to the state. If kinship networks were

¹³ *Black Military Experience*, 153-7.

¹⁴ For recent work that articulates a similar concern which has influenced my thinking, see Erik Mathisen, *Pledges of Allegiance: State Formation in Mississippi Between Slavery and Redemption*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2009. For recent work that emphasizes slave claims on citizenship, see Chandra Manning, "Will Work for Citizenship," *Beyond Freedom: New Directions in the Study of Emancipation* Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery Conference, Yale University, Nov. 11, 2011. The black soldier literature began as soon as the war itself ended. See William Wells Brown, *Negro in the American Rebellion*. (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1867). In 1953, Benjamin Quarles published *The Negro in the Civil War* (DeCapo Press, reprint 1989). Black soldier historiography flourishes in 1965 (coinciding with centennial Civil War commemoration). See Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army 1861-1865* (NY: 1965) and James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Blacks Felt and Acted during the War for the Union*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965). For more recent work, see John David Smith, ed., *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era*. (Chapel Hill, 2004). And of course a surge of new work coinciding with the Civil War sesquicentennial celebrates the black military service and its path to citizenship, including: Richard M. Reid, *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers in the Civil War Era*. (Chapel Hill: 2008), Stephen V. Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments That Changed the Course of the Civil War*. (New York: 2008), and Barbara Tomblin, *Bluejackets and Contrabands: African Americans and the Union Navy*. (Lexington, Ky: 2009).

the heart of black political formation from slavery into freedom, strengthening those were an undertaking worth giving priority.¹⁵

Second, slaves found power in staying in a place as well as leaving it. Scholars have tended to make movement and mobility the centerpiece of increased political consciousness and empowerment, a claim that reaches its zenith with the black soldier's story. As one historian put it: "As slaves or even freemen, blacks generally viewed the world through a narrow lens. As soldiers, they traveled broadly, met a wider variety of people, and expanded their range of experience. ...Their new knowledge and authority burst the bonds of subservience bred by slavery and second-class citizenship."¹⁶ While acknowledging the necessity of mobility in the dissemination of information in both slavery and the war, this essay seeks to draw attention to the power slaves had or sought in geographical stability in the South, in claims on and yearning for home. They prized the knowledge of land, culture, and neighborhood cultivated in that "narrow lens" of antebellum slavery, and they brought it to bear on decisions to stay or to leave. Many slaves conceptualized their exodus story not as a journey to the land of Canaan but a journey to make the Canaan of the American South into a New Israel. I take seriously the sacredness of place in refugee accounts. From slaves on abandoned plantations they claimed as their own to refugees in freedmen's villages they built themselves and refused to leave, slaves resisted the army's summons to move them and the pretense, often supported by northern abolitionism, that such movement was beneficial to them. This essay traces the contests over movement and the ways in which slaves appropriated and transformed land into homes. As the political geography changed, so too did the contingencies of place and power. Black military service in many cases severed black men from potential homesteads at a critical moment. As

¹⁵ For kinship and black political formation, see Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: 2003).

¹⁶ *Black Military Experience*, 27-28.

one group of conscripts put it, “by the time we get out of this all the Government cheap Property & all the lands that would sold cheap will be gone.”¹⁷ This essay locates power and increasing political consciousness in the ability to imagine or claim home. It locates protest not only in the desire to move but also in the determination to stay.

Finally, more than fighting for freedom, slaves worked for it. Scholars have argued that even with the injustices within the Union army, the act of fighting to defeat the Confederacy while seeking to right Union injustices radicalized slaves: “The successes of black soldiers in their war against discrimination within the army, however limited, politicized them and their families, preparing all blacks for the larger struggle they would face at war’s end. ...black participation in the politics of reconstruction began with enlistment in the Union army.”¹⁸ The intense trials and traumas of military service were indeed staging grounds for petitioning the government, but to project these struggles as the politicizing force for all emancipated black southerners obscures first what those military traumas did to weaken black communities and second the alternative sites of black protests and preparations for reconstruction. Non-soldier refugees were often equally engaged in actively pursuing freedom, in defeating the Confederacy, and even in demanding recognition from the government.¹⁹ Even more importantly though, the most crucial relationships for empowering their communities into reconstruction were not always with the government but with each other. The work of turning strangers into allies in these camps cannot be underestimated. Taking stock of changes and adaptations that black military service wrought for families and especially women in the camps, this essay shifts our gaze to the visions and activity of community of which black soldiery was only peripheral.

¹⁷ *Families and Freedom*, 140.

¹⁸ *Black Military Experience*, 2,31.

¹⁹ See Stephanie McCurry, “War, Gender, and Emancipation in the Civil War South” in William Alan Blair and Karen Fisher Younger, eds. *Lincoln’s Proclamation: Emancipation Reconsidered*. (Chapel Hill, 2009). In this article and in *Confederate Reckoning*, McCurry stresses another dimension that the emphasis on black military service misses—the work for freedom of slaves on plantations behind Confederate lines, especially the protests of slave women. For more on how southern slaves in the Confederacy worked to subvert it, see Southern Claims Commission records in which former slaves recount their “work for the Union” and evidence of their support and loyalty.

More than anything, we should make careful study of the remarkable amount of organization and resourcefulness it took for refugee slaves to gather their families into Union lines, to build information networks, to pray, eat, hoe, sing, give birth, share living space, take care of each other's children, to imagine home while in a place outside a "household," and, above all, to amend a mantra recited so often that it had become white noise always humming—"I'll meet you in Heaven"—the parting words to a daughter sold, now *maybe* "I'll meet you at Fort Monroe." It was the force and forcefulness of these families to be together in *this* world that made freedom most meaningful and marked a radical change in black cosmology. Even if these camps and villages did not last, it is still worth tracing the impression of the errand. And it is worth recognizing how the life imagined in the slave refugee camps could be deeply at odds with the life the state imagined for the black soldier and his family.

Contraband camps emerged on the landscape as Union forces came to control southern territory. Wherever Union troops set up camp, slaves followed. Roughly estimated, there were around a hundred contraband camps documented under Union jurisdiction.²⁰ They were located just outside of the District of Columbia, at various points along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, at a number of locations in Kentucky and Tennessee, and up the Mississippi River Valley from New Orleans to Cairo, Illinois. Some camps lasted for only a few months, while others evolved into settlements that continued into the postwar period. In the deep South, former slaves were more likely to stay on or near the plantations where they had been enslaved; this was especially true in those areas where Union forces directly occupied the plantations. In the upper South and the border states, contrabands usually gathered in camps that were near Union outposts in occupied

²⁰ A productive challenge for this study has been to mark and map the contraband camps. References to "slave refugee camps" in slave narratives do not always match up neatly with official records—for example, the mention of a slave refugee camp in Wharton, Texas in WPA narrative of Mary Armstrong, Houston, TX, 1937. As new research progresses, a more accurate picture of the camps that puts on the map the descriptions from slaves themselves should emerge.

towns or villages. More refugee camps sprang up to relieve overcrowding or to create distance between the contrabands and the army, especially around D.C., and at various places in the Mississippi Valley.²¹ (For maps of the Union occupation and military movement in the Civil War South, see Appendix.) While sweeping generalizations about the slaves in these camps is impossible, the patterns and priorities are unmistakable. My suggestions here, while attempting to synthesize the experiences of the camps in service of argument, have kept in mind the expediencies and contingencies of place and political context.

Recruitment progressed rapidly over 1863 but varied according to local custom and military leadership. Recruitment stations cropped up with the local provost marshals and with the efforts of specially commissioned recruiting officers. Resistance to recruitment manifested itself most vociferously in places where black southerners were already experiencing something like freedom—in other words, where former masters were absent. (See Appendix for table of black military enlistment by state.) For example, of the two early abolitionist efforts in 1862 to raise black regiments first in the South Carolina sea islands and then in New Orleans, the sea island effort met striking resistance to recruitment while the New Orleans effort saw a more positive response. The difference was that sea island masters had fled at the sight of Union gunboats, while New Orleans planters remained, claimed Union loyalty, and kept their slaves. The abolitionist pioneers in these scenarios, General David Hunter in South Carolina and General John Phelps in Louisiana, even as the former openly defied the wishes of the people he purported to help, both imagined black military service as the most direct route to the end of slavery and the defeat of the Confederacy. It was a win-win—a win for the slaves, a win for the union, (and the price of patriotism for the planter). But as recruitment progressed, the cant of the

²¹ For a nice summary of the camps, see Patricia Click, *Time Full of Trial: the Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony, 1862-1867*. (Chapel Hill, 2001), 1-7. For a fuller portrait, see Freedmen and Southern Society Project, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Series 1, Vol. 2: Wartime Genesis of Free Labor-Upper South and Wartime Genesis of Free Labor-Lower South* (Cambridge, 1982).

“win-win” changed. It would get white men out of their conscription obligations, states out of their quota commitments, it would replace the slave regime with military discipline for the slaves, it would solve the problem of “vagrancy” (read: unsupervised blacks) and “unemployment” (read: blacks working for themselves). The earlier mention of the “soldier-hunting tour” became painfully prescient as recruiting gangs roamed the countryside like bounty hunters seeking black males who often only marginally fit the description of military age or able-bodied. The inequalities of the service itself have been well documented—black soldiers saw a 36% higher death rate than whites, received \$6 less a month than whites though promised equal pay, were not paid for years, were taxed gratuitously, were compelled to sign three-year contracts while whites could be “six-monthers,” were systematically denied furloughs, had no safe way to get wages back to loved ones, were barred or had great difficulty advancing in the ranks, were given the most odious and dangerous assignments, experienced aggressive incarceration for “desertion” and execution for mutiny, the list goes on. This treatment had a deleterious influence on recruitment. But above all, it was the security of loved ones that made the difference in black willingness to serve.



Figure 1. Fugitive African Americans Fording the Rappahannock River, Virginia, Aug. 1862



Figure 2. "Arrival of Negro family into Union Lines."

In the above photographs, African American migrants travel with their belongings from home, collectively seeking new lives in freedom. They appear more like pioneering settlers than fugitives.

Family First: The Process of Black Organization and the Relationship to the State

They came as families. There was no precedent in American history for this kind of coming on this scale. They packed up wagons with trunks and babies and blind octogenarians and came like “the oncoming of cities,” leaving masters to query “how so many children got off safely I can’t imagine.”²² How they came was important. It forced policy decisions. When the first three male slaves escaped into Fort Monroe, Virginia on May 24, 1861, General Benjamin Butler refused to return them on the basis that their labor was aiding the Confederacy. They were now confiscated as “contraband of war.” But soon after, it was not more individual male laborers who arrived but caravans of families. This was a problem legally and logistically for Butler. The authorities could not conceive of the labor of women and children as aiding the Confederacy and therefore subject to the “contraband” rationale. Besides, women and children were not assets but liabilities to the Union, were they not? Dependents to be fed and protected

²²John Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen: Reminiscences of the Civil War with Special Reference to the Work for the Contrabands and Freedmen of the Mississippi Valley*. (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 2. Leslie Ann Schwalm, *A Hard Fight For We: Women’s Transition From Slavery To Freedom in South Carolina*. (University of Illinois Press, 1997), 89.

rather than laborers to be appropriated. The northern business and political community, approving Butler's move, rose in unison to aver that the women, children, and infirm should be promptly sent back to their masters to be their burden. But the slaves would not be moved. They forced the Union to reckon with them. As Congress deliberated over confiscation and conscription policy, they had to grapple with imagining black male laborers or soldiers as connected to kin the government could not ignore.²³

At the moment the chance for emancipation reached slaves' ears, the first thought was crystal clear. "'63 when Mr. Will set us all free. Away I goin' to find my mamma."²⁴ Keeping the family you had, finding the family you lost, and making the family that was going to get you through intact or take care of your children if you didn't—these were slaves' first thoughts in freedom. Again and again in the reports refugees gave to missionary-teachers, slaves identified themselves and narrated their journeys by the people they came with and the people they came looking for.

How they came was important. It was how they imagined their freedom. If we are to see the contraband camp experience as a window onto what slaves wanted from their emancipation, we do well to take in the photographs of the fugitive families coming into Union lines (see above). We can place them in the catalogue of refugees in war-torn scenarios throughout history, but perhaps another analogue worth considering is to compare them to pioneers willing to risk all for an opportunity. Rather than being displaced from their homes, many came in search of them. They came with possessions—not the master's silver, but with their own

²³ Although space does not allow a full treatment of the military policies and Congressional Acts that resulted in response to refugees' actions, a few key acts include: First Confiscation Act of 1861, Act Prohibiting the Return of Slaves of March 1862, Militia Act of July 1862, and Second Confiscation Act of August 1862.

²⁴ She found her in a refugee camp. Mary Armstrong, WPA narrative, in Norman R. Yetman, *Voices from Slavery: 100 Authentic Slave Narratives*. (Courier Dover Publications, 1999), 20.

property— “boxes, bedding, and luggage of all sorts.”²⁵ They had to be organized to pull this off. We can see them in this way not as the embodiments of a wretched institution but seekers on their way to plant seeds they had salvaged in new ground. They came hoping the Union could make this possible.

Leaving—or refusing to leave with fleeing masters— was a blow to both slavery and the Confederacy, but did they come to serve or did they come to settle? If at first it was only their labor that seemed to the Union worth confiscating, it soon became clear the more valuable prize was their allegiance. Their local knowledge could win battles. In the Mississippi Valley, the strength of their population could “line the river with a loyal population.”²⁶ But if slaves were savvy enough to infer that what their masters feared they might welcome, they were also cautious. White army emissaries seeking local black help reported trouble winning slaves’ confidence, but found more ready accomplices when black liaisons were among the army.²⁷ The Union bond developed through the mediation of other slaves. “Colored men will help colored men and they will work along the by paths and get through,” reported Superintendent of Contrabands Charles Wilder.²⁸ Many of the first venturers to the contraband camps were scouts, and once word spread of the camps’ relative safety, the slave refugees came.²⁹ But if their very presence suggested some kind of bond to the Union, it was unclear what the nature of the relationship was to be. With the bond to the master severed and government “ownership” of confiscated slaves uneven and unclear, the question arose: “To whom do you belong?”

²⁵ Maj. Frank H. Peck to Gen. J.W. Phelps, Camp Parapet, Carrollton County, LA, 15 June 1862, in *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, ser. 1, vol. 15,491. For insight into how slaves earned their own property under slavery, see Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South*. (University of North Carolina Press, 2003). Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, *The Slaves’ Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas*. (Psychology Press, 1995).

²⁶ Adj. General Lorenzo Thomas, as quoted in Mathisen, *Pledges of Allegiance*, 176.

²⁷ Harriet Tubman reportedly acted in this capacity, for example. Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*. (Auburn, N. Y.: W. J. Moses, Printer, 1869), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bradford/bradford.html> (Accessed January 24,2012).

²⁸ Testimony by the Superintendent of Contrabands at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, before the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission [Fortress Monroe, Va.] May 9, 1863.

²⁹ Testimony of Charles B. Wilder to American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, 9 May 1863, *National Archives*. O-328, Letters Received, Record Group 94, Entry 12. Wilder describes many instances where husbands and fathers leave for trips of as much as 200 miles to gather their families and return to the camps.

“I reckon I’m Massa Lincoln’s slave now,” a black woman in Norfolk replied when a white missionary stopped her on the street to ask this question.³⁰ It was a wry response—designed to tell her inquisitor that her “master” sanctioned her unmolested movement. If the relationship with the Union was still ill-defined, the link to Lincoln was most readily embraced. Lincoln was dearer to slaves as both a larger-than-life character in a millennial story of emancipation that was playing itself out before them and a sympathetic friend who could intercede on their behalf. While scholars have recently come to call the condition between slavery and citizenship one of “subjecthood,” emphasizing the personalization and intimacy slaves conferred onto the state, we would be remiss to fail to grapple with the religious dimension of the relationship between ex-slaves and the Union voiced most often through Lincoln.³¹ With announcements of freedom, “thousands came out shouting and praising God, and Father, or Master Abe, as they termed him.” Letters poured into Lincoln, “Excellent Sir, When you are dead and in Heaven, in a thousand years that action of yours [the Emancipation Proclamation] will make the Angels sing your praises I know it.” And with his martyrdom at end of the war, allusions to Christ ran rampant, “Massa Linkum! our ‘dored Redeemer an’ Savior an’ Frien’! Amen!”³² Although these religious iterations of Lincoln have not gone undocumented, the implications of what slaves expected from such a relationship have yet to be understood. For these were neither mere metaphors nor simple exclamations of jubilation. Slaves had long resisted slavery by contesting their master’s sole claim to them—their true master was the Lord.³³ When “Massa Lincoln” enters their lexicon, it is as a Godsend.

³⁰ Lucy Chase to Dear folks at home, April 1, 1863, Chase Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society (Worcester, MA).

³¹ See Mathisen, *Pledges of Allegiance*; Kate Masur, “‘A Rare Phenomenon of Philological Vegetation’: The Word ‘Contraband’ and the Meanings of Emancipation in the United States,” *Journal of American History* 93, no. 4 (2007).

³² Garland H. White in Edwin S. Redkey, ed., *A Grand Army of Black Men: Letters from African-American Soldiers in the Union Army 1861-1865*. (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 175; Hannah Johnson, in Ira Berlin and Barbara J. Fields, eds. *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War*. (New Press, 1993), 450; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. (Vintage, 1976), 273.

³³ While Christian iterations are most common, others exist or coexist with a single Christian God.

Belonging to “Massa Lincoln” was not a transfer of title of ownership but a continuation of a community of which slaves were already a part—the family of God.

Rather than raising government leader to apotheosis and leaving political deliverance up to white leadership though, a belief in Lincoln was as malleable as a belief in God, with the details of the relationship of faith left to the believer, especially for slaves whose trust in God was cultivated more amongst and inside themselves than in the formal church.³⁴ And the foremost concerns in letters to Lincoln is reconnecting with family. “Mr president It is my Desire to be free. to go to see my people on the eastern shore,” wrote Maryland slave Annie Davis in 1864. Lincoln was not necessarily slaves’ means of entry into a nation but a facilitator of passage to their people. The religious significance of emancipation made the most sense when it accompanied family reunion. As one missionary-teacher recounted:

While I was teaching, a black face was thrust in at the door: the body soon followed, but so enveloped in rags that one could hardly tell whether it was a human being or not, till the voice was heard,—“Ise come!” Upon that, such a screaming and clapping of hands I never heard. They all rushed for him; and I thought they would devour him, clothes and all. One of the more thoughtful ones said, “Do scuse them, missus; for that boy libed on de next plantation to Massa Taylor : we never spec to see him. Lor bress me, how we do come togedder!”³⁵

The camps were sites of reunion. And this was empowering beyond words. It shifted the focus from “to whom do you belong?” to a sense of belonging among “my people.”

Religious expressions connecting them to Lincoln did not precisely equal a to-be-taken-for-granted commitment to the Union. Many came into the lines with the words of their masters ringing in their ears— “the Yankees have horns and will sell you to Cuba” as well as “If the Yankees *conquer* they *will divide our lands among the Niggers*.”³⁶ Slaves were willing to risk

³⁴ Genovese argued that slave transference of messianic hopes onto Lincoln was a failure of slave politicization, arguing that when it came to political revolution, slaves looked to whites for leadership. *Roll Jordan Roll*, 273-274.

³⁵ Signed S.E.F., Letters of Teachers and Superintendents of the New-England Freedmen's Aid Society, Fifth Series, Oct. 15, 1864. <http://faculty.assumption.edu/aas/default.html> (Accessed January 14, 2012.)

³⁶ Mentions of Yankees with horns and intentions to sell slaves to Cuba are so ubiquitous as not to warrant any specific citation. For a taste, sample the volumes of Works Progress Administration interviews with former slaves in George P. Rawick, *The American slave: a composite autobiography*. (Greenwood Pub. Co., 1974). Discussions of preconceived notions about getting the land are also common, but this particular quotation comes from Hahn, *Nation Under Our Feet*, 130.

the former for a chance at the latter. As one camp missionary-teacher told it: “They chuckle with satisfaction and a feeling of reverence when they say, ‘The Union-folks own all the States now.’ ...their pride and importance is greatly increased, now they are in the hands of the ‘Union,’ who owns all the estates of all their masters!”³⁷ But if they had hopes that Yankees would be their allies in securing land on which to make their homes in freedom, they also had to watch out for the Yankees with horns. Kidnapping rings for selling contrabands back into slavery proliferated, just as similar scandals took place kidnapping males for impressment into the service. As a Virginia superintendent of contrabands recounted: “The masters will come in to Suffolk in the day time and with the help of some of the 99th carry off their fugitives and by and by smuggle them across the lines and the soldier will get his \$20. or \$50.”³⁸ Or this story from New Orleans was one of many like it: “Recently four white men, pretending to be acting under authority of Capt. Sawyer...came to the residence of the wife of George Johnson...and kidnapped her. carried her down to the plantation ...and there subjected her to the most cruel and unmerciful treatment.”³⁹ The widespread incarceration of black southern men was easily sustained by charges of draft resistance and desertion, and the jails became feeding grounds for the wartime slave trade.

Slaves more readily talked to Harriet Tubman than Billy Yank, but the solidarity of all black camp inhabitants should not be assumed. They needed to find out who among the black faces in these camps they could trust, and that was a process. Camp inhabitants had to be savvy about their delineations of insiders and outsiders—they had to be wary of those who would sell them out for a price, white or black. And there were regional rivalries—a bias in Virginia camps against North Carolina refugees, for example: “I an’t going with those North Carolina niggers

³⁷ *Dear Ones at Home*, 61.

³⁸ Ira Berlin, et al, eds. *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Series I, Vol. 1: The Destruction of Slavery*, 90.

³⁹ Ira Berlin, and Leslie Rowland, eds. *Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of African-American Kinship in the Civil War Era*. (The New Press, 1998), 57.

[on the farms],” snapped Virginia slaves. Or a North Carolina refugee woman known as “North Carolina,” a badge of her outsiderhood, commented judgmentally on Virginia women’s fecundity: “I think they have too many children here. I think the business better kind uh dry up till things is more settled.”⁴⁰ Tensions appeared between free blacks from the north and slaves from the south, especially over the question of military service. Northern black abolitionists whose families and homes were more secure, while more empathetic to refugees than many whites of their ilk, had more of a stake in the black service question and were more aggressive about pushing male slaves to serve. Former Virginia slave Garland H. White, who now lived in Ohio, returned to Virginia as army chaplain. In the wake of a December 1863 measure leading to especially heavy-handed impressment of black men away from their jobs and families, eliciting howls of black protest, Chaplain White, a former slave, faulted Virginia contrabands for their reluctance “to take up arms to help free themselves and be useful to the country.”⁴¹ Black preachers from the north frequently became highly visible participants in recruitment rallies, offering capstones to white recruiters’ speeches. As one such preacher intoned in promotion of black entry into the service, echoing a familiar religiously-sanctioned endorsement of hierarchy: “Everything must have a head. The plantation, the house, the steamboat, the army, and to obey that head was to obey the law.”⁴² Indeed, refugees had to be wary of over-zealous black recruiters, as some of the most merciless recruiting gangs were comprised wholly of black mercenaries.

So how did they build alliances and allegiances with each other? Through careful and determined exchange, they bartered goods, traded knowledge, shared stories, and built trust. They employed similar moves in their interactions with government agents, and watched to see if

⁴⁰ *Dear Ones at Home*, 61.

⁴¹ *Black Military Experience*, 115-116.

⁴² As quoted in Mathisen, *Pledges of Allegiance*, 211.

those agents responded like masters or friends. Missionary-teacher Laura Towne describes a scrupulous and determined effort to repay every kindness received with eggs, for example. “They transfer their gratitude to ‘Government’,” she explained, but they were also poised to set the terms of what they would give in exchange for that gratitude. Missionary-teacher Lucy Chase describes the scenes in which women gathered in the evening with lit pine-knots, each with her “sad story to tell” about lost and looked-for children, while taking care of their motherless charges. Piece by piece these shared stories built the fictive kin networks that allowed childless mothers and motherless children to connect and survive.⁴³

Resources were often scarce, competition fierce. Which is why it is so astonishing to regard the military reports of these camps taken across the South from 1863 to 1864. The reports repeat again and again: “refugees quite independent.” “very few incidents of disorder.” “only six reports of assaults in a year.” The ration lists shed light on the cooperation necessary in the venture—in coastal North Carolina for example, by comparison, refugee whites received sixteen times the amount for one quarter of the population.⁴⁴ More important than the blatant racism of the unbalanced allocation is the insight into black resourcefulness. These ration records suggest an impressive ability in the black community to negotiate among large groups of slaves from a wide array of backgrounds who came together, subsisted, and imagined future lives for themselves in these camps. When they petitioned the government for a chance to own the land, they made proposals that suggest what must have been thorough previous discussion among themselves. Their proposals for their family allotments were quite modest—eight or ten acre plots, for instance. Forty-five slaves who had made a settlement for themselves on an island on the Mississippi River reported to the Union troops who were evicting them that some of them

⁴³ Laura Towne, *Letters and diary of Laura M. Towne: written from the Sea islands of South Carolina, 1862-1884*. (Printed at the Riverside press, 1912), 23; *Dear Ones*, 60.

⁴⁴ Berlin, *Freedom Series: Wartime Genesis of Free Labor-Upper South*, 92.

had come from 300 miles away, a testimony to the cooperative work of the venture and undoubtedly the help of local slaves along way.⁴⁵

The camp experience involved socializing so that someone would take care of your blood kin if something happened to you. It was about leaving a trail of details so that each black listener you met might lead your sister or brother or father back to you. It was about teaching strangers to read when you had only half the alphabet yourself, and agreeing to eight-acre farm plots and knowing your neighbors weren't your master. Make no mistake. Conditions in these camps were often bleak. Disease, most of all, was rife. But murders between refugees were few. Though land was prime, turf wars between slaves were rare.

Their path to equality may have been most tangible, seemed most realizable, in the forging of relationships that would be so productive and secure as to seem to defy a government to deny them legal recognition. It was not so much that they were unwilling to serve as it was that they looked productively toward unions that stressed a more inviting and relatable vision of home than speeches on "Everything must have a head" did. They focused on relationships that could get them axes for eggs.

"Run Right out of Slavery in to Soldiery": The Case For Making It Home

If Reconstruction became a struggle over rights to the land, and the "experiment" of Reconstruction began in some of the these camps during the war, then military service was not a stepping stone but an impediment to the realization of land ownership for former slaves.⁴⁶

Movement defined the refugee camp experience, but slaves were increasingly insistent that they

⁴⁵ For military and government reports of camps, see American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission Record, *National Archives*, O-328, RG 94, Microfilm M619, reel 200. For land distribution petitions and proposals, see Berlin, ed. *Wartime Genesis of Free Labor-Upper South*, 145, 179, 208, 418*. South Carolina Sea Island camp residents make elaborate plans for land distribution, as Willie Lee Rose recounts in her classic 1964 study. Willie Lee Nichols Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (reprint, University of Georgia Press, 1999). Sea Island camp residents were mostly all locals from the islands or the lowcountry mainland with extensive familiarity of the area. Still, volatility in government policy flipped the proprietors and inhabitants of the land many times so that often those who had the best claim and most familiarity with the land were transplanted somewhere else. For Mississippi River island community, see Berlin, ed. *Freedom Documentary History: Wartime Genesis of Free Labor-Lower South*, 655.

⁴⁶ Willie Lee Rose famously calls the Port Royal Experiment a "rehearsal for Reconstruction." Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*.

make their own decisions about where and when to move...and when to stay. Camps could be beacons drawing in the caravans. Camps could be enclosures where Union forces had rounded up slaves who had been living independently to be under white supervision. While a systematic recounting is not possible here, it is worth noting the incidences of resistance to Union efforts to move them.

In a series of letters between a captain at the Cairo, Illinois contraband camp and the Quartermaster General in Virginia in August 1863, there is an attempt at a labor exchange, where an overabundance of male contrabands at Cairo could be shuttled across the country to fill labor shortages on the eastern shore. But the men turned out to be unwieldy cargo. They wanted to stay close to their people. When the captain replied that he could not get them to go, the quartermaster general retorted that he should stop *asking* them. Whether the army preferred to think of them as property or people, the will of the would-be participants mattered.⁴⁷

The Union had appropriated male labor from the beginning, but Union laborers often remained with or near their families in the camps. With the onset of aggressive conscription, the army moved the enlisted men. But in many instances camp women moved with them, creating shanty towns near garrisons. One such Memphis area settlement of several hundred women, derided for carrying off “axes, shovels, spades, and picks, wherever they can be found, to use in building, and maintaining these households,” was to be relocated to President’s Island on the Mississippi River, separating women from men. It didn’t happen. “The people are unwilling to be moved.” As the frustrated Memphis commander carped, it was “no light and withall a very

⁴⁷ Capt. Woolfolk at Cairo to General Ingalls (Quartermaster General) in Virginia (8 Aug 1863) with accompanying letter to Washington (1 Aug 63). *National Archives*, RG 94, Ent. 225, Box 399, “Contraband folder.”

unthankful job,” especially when the husbands (Union soldiers themselves) “in some instances have come out under arms to prevent it.”⁴⁸

Through all the trials that black soldiers protested, it was their movement away from families that became most destructive to their visions of freedom. Rather than exposing black soldiers to unprecedented travel and experience, military service often held them hostage in foreign locales with no furlough, even well after the war.

I inlisted January the 4th 1864 under Col Russel Culumbia boon County, Mo. when I left my family I promised them that I would come home on furloe in August last I lost two of my children I asked for a leaf of absence and was refused . . . thare has ben a grate meny of my felow soldiers who through grief and anziety about their families have pined away and died ...we stood on the bank and shed teers to think that we who had batled for our country over two years should still be retained and deprived of the priviledge of seeing those who are so dear to us my actions have proved that I have ben true to my government and I love it dearley now the war is over and I now want to see those who are dearer to me than my life⁴⁹

If military service was purporting to build a relationship, a fidelity between the ex-slave and the state, then the immediate inconvenience that there was no one in state power who the ex-slave could trust became all too apparent during his term. If and when soldiers did get paid, there was no safe way to get those wages to their families and homes they were hoping to have in freedom:

we has not any way to send our Money home. the men that gos home they live in adifrent part of the State. and thire is no Purson that we could trust for we has sent large amounts of Money to our famuleys. and they has not got it. and I larns that thire is a Numbers of our famuleys has ben turned out of Doors, and they has no Place to lay thire heads and we as no way to healp them. we come and Left our States our Wifes and our homes and children in such away that they may do the best they can and to take cire of thire Self. ye what kind of fixt was it too. Now the old Servent he has no Proprty he has no Money he has no House to put them in to.

The advent of recruitment created widespread disruption to family formations, collective black efforts at community, and burgeoning allegiance to the Union. When one group of soldiers wrote a collective letter to the president in January 1866, they described their experience as “Run Right out of Slavery in to Soldiery”:

we is heer yet & we will have to buy our lands & places & by the time we get out of this all the Government cheap Property & all the lands that would sold cheap will be gone & we will have a Hard struggle to get along in the US & then all the Southern white People will have us for alaughin & game

⁴⁸ *Families and Freedom*, 75-77.

⁴⁹ James Herney, Helena, Arkansas, May 15 1866, in *Families and Freedom*, 149.

after for our Braverist that we did to Run away from them & come as soldiers they will be glad to see that we would not have but very little money & we would not have any land, atall for all the cheap in thing are going now ...So Please if you can do any good for us do it in the name of god [signed] it is a mejority of men of the 33 Regt USCT⁵⁰

If former slave men came and met in the army and became “politicized” there, they had been experiencing similar meeting and planning before 1863 recruitment in the cultural and political meeting grounds that were the contraband camps. For many slaves these camps were the center of a burgeoning political life, and the place where slaves were discussing their future homesteads, and many men whisked away from these camps knew that. If military service was taking former slaves across the country to see new things, the camps were bringing together new peoples sharing new information, and they were immediately putting these exchanges into community building. These were makeshift communities, but there was the promise to be something more. Soldiers were anxious to get back to that, often more anxious for that than to prove themselves worthy soldiers to white eyes.

The refugees were most anxious to have something resembling home so that they could knit together their family—that they knew where to meet, where to stay—where to keep “sight of each other.” It was in this way that in interviews recounting the refugee experience, the Yankee run-ins were a trauma. “Lord, Lord, honey, dem times too over sad, ’cause Yankees took lots of slaves away an’ dey [their] made homes. An’ whole heap of families lost sight of each other.”⁵¹ The way Minnie Folkes told it, slaves were not looking for the Union to give them freedom so they could begin to make their homes. In the midst of war, those homes were already made.

There was a notable dilemma between serving and settling. Two visions of entry into an American identity at odds with each other—to citizenship through military service, to land through improving it. The former compelled them to move, the latter only possible if they

⁵⁰ *Families and Freedom*, 139-140.

⁵¹ Minnie Folkes, former slave, St. Petersburg, Virginia in Charles L. Perdue and Thomas E. Barden, eds. *Weevils in the wheat: interviews with Virginia ex-slaves*. (University of Virginia Press, 1976), 95.

stayed. Overwhelmingly, when government agents took surveys of slaves in the camps, when asked if they would like to go north, they respond in the negative unless it was the only way to ensure their freedom.⁵² When service compelled their separation, they drew on the ties they had to the people who remained for leverage. When soldier fathers away on service could not claim children “apprenticed” to former masters after the war, “In every case where I have bound out children, thus far Some Grand Mother or fortieth cousin has come to have them released” reported a Freedmen’s Bureau agent, a testament to the determination of a community composed of fragments of families knit together by their common experience of kin separation.⁵³

They further sought to reconstruct the knowledge they developed in the place they knew best in their new environs—from looking for herbs they recognized to seeking out accents they could decipher to singing hymns they all knew the words to. They sought to reconstruct the familiar. In postwar writings between soldiers and family separated by service, soldiers sometimes chose to settle where service took them, and negotiations began over where home should be. In one soldier’s letter to his Virginia family, trying to encourage them to join him in Galveston, Texas, he writes about flora and fauna in Texas he thought his sister would like and added “I was not fool enough to marry a Texas girl. My wife is from Georgia.”⁵⁴ We have yet to appreciate fully in an explosion of migrations both liberating and coerced during the war, not only what they lost by moving but what they reconstructed from that loss that was tied to and re-created home.

The Fight For Work Of Freedom: Reconstructing Hegemony

It was war. In the eyes of those who hoped to win it on the battlefield, the “family” was a domestic institution best kept indoors. The hordes gathering around their garrisons, on the other

⁵² See New York Daily Tribune, Jan 27, 1863, “Important Facts Concerning the Negro” summarizing questionnaire responses of contraband camp supervisory personnel, *National Archives*, Record Group 92, Entry 225, Box 719.

⁵³ *Families and Freedom*, 242.

⁵⁴ *Families and Freedom*, 17-19.

hand, were subject to be mined for their utility in hastening Union victory. The “family” became atomized into its constituent parts and their individual uses, their identities known through their wage labor for the state. So the quartermaster rolls of contraband employment show teamsters, loggers, porters, stevedores, laundresses, sweepers, messengers, cooks, personal servants, and rows upon rows of simply “laborers.”⁵⁵ But a few perceptive military observers noted how black communities were also appropriating labor among themselves, especially among those deemed “useless.” “They are more independent in their habits than many suppose,” a medical officer observed. The curved old men on sticks the army had cast aside were central to camp life, despite their inadequacy as soldiers. “Their burials and other religious services, conducted chiefly by these old patriarchs, are very impressive and calculated to sustain the religious tone of the race.” The women were the health care providers of the camps. “Their own ‘grannies,’ who are generally youngish or middle aged mulatto women, are well skilled in most of the simple and many of the scientific medical agents of our art.”⁵⁶ For slaves in these camps both healing the sick and burying the dead were deeply spiritual vocations. Outside of Civil War historians’ gaze for too long has been the religious work of slave refugees—the work not of a church but of an invisible institution emerging from the hush arbor. We have been quick to see the religious expressions of slaves in the midst of emancipation as reactive, but slaves saw their religious efforts as absolutely central to the work of emancipation.

I am suggesting then for scholars to consider alternative sites and actions of slave politicization outside Union army service in the Civil War. Through all of the intersections of slaves and Union actors, the sources covering this period reveal volatility, anxiety, and

⁵⁵ Recently, scholars have been grappling with how laboring women fit into this new terrain of proto-citizenship. See Chandra Manning, “Will Work for Citizenship.” And for a discussion on the Congressional debates and legal ramifications of the black soldier’s quid pro quo and wives’ disfranchisement, Amy Dru Stanley, “Instead of Waiting for the Thirteenth Amendment: The War Power, Slave Marriage, and Inviolable Human Rights,” *American Historical Review*, June 2010.

⁵⁶ *Families and Freedom*, 59-62. For “Granny Midwives,” see Vennie Deas-Moore, “Home Remedies, Herb Doctors, and Granny Midwives.” *The World and I Journal*, January 1987, 474-485.

ambivalence on both sides. Still, even if these encounters opening up spaces for autonomy were sometimes temporary, they were radical disruptions to the master's hegemony. Slaves carried with them the knowledge and resources they had built during their lives in bondage, and now they were setting to the work of reconstructing that hegemony under their own aegis. They had not yet codified a unified, explicit political ideology (and the northern abolitionist ideology, for all its virtues, was no perfect fit). But the fragments they had gathered from their distinctive cultures, the unspoken subtexts that allowed them to know and trust one another, these were the building blocks of hegemony. And in the Civil War contraband camps, slaves were recasting their "labor."

Refugee women's work was essential to sustaining life in the camps. Refugee women negotiated their own way often outside of (or in spite of) claims as "soldiers' wives." As military recruitment nabbed the men away, refugee women came to comprise the majority in most contraband camps. And many times in these camps the sites that appear to be most revolutionary were those that were most domestic. The sewing circle became the site where information was exchanged, where literacy took root, where women made connections and plans, even where slave women asserted superior skills to Yankee supervisors, as when one group in Norfolk, Virginia, purposely changed the sewing pattern the Union missionaries had given them.⁵⁷ Collective sewing projects became the sites of informal schools—with women learning the alphabet and the Bible as they stitched.⁵⁸

It was women's decision to recast their labor as worth something because it benefitted their family and their community rather than whites that was revolutionary. It was this decision that in the postwar period was so highly threatening, so radically outside white southerners' idea

⁵⁷ *Dear Ones*, 32-33.

⁵⁸ *Dear Ones*, 41.

of order, that it elicited posted warnings from “regulator” groups, precursors to the Ku Klux Klan. Topping the list were concerns over women’s employment: “1st. No man shall squat negroes on his place unless they are all under his employ male and female. 2d. Negroe women shall be employed by white persons. 3d. All children shall be hired out for something. 4th. Negroes found in cabins to themselves shall suffer the penalty. 5th. Negroes shall not be allowed to hire negroes. 6th. Idle men, women or children, shall suffer the penalty.”⁵⁹ The efforts of white southerners to portray black women’s work as “idleness” is a testament to its radical character. The very live fear of it contradicts its lack of activity—it was instead highly productive in creating something that threatened white control. And it was the women who were producing it.

White-knuckled planters wrote to the government during and after the war to insist that such work was “idleness.” In a letter with more laugh lines than usual (accusing women with three or four children of being idle, for example), a Georgia planter seeks the government to compel them to perform field work or hold them in violation of laws against vagrancy.

These idle women are bad examples to those at work & they are often mischief makers—having no employment their brain becomes more or less the Devil’s work shop as is always the case with idle people—black or white & quarrels & Musses among the colored people generally can be traced to these idle folks that are neither serving God—Man or their country—Are they not in some sort vagrants as they are living without employment—and mainly without any visible means of support—and if so are they not amenable to vagrant act—?⁶⁰

The planters and “regulators” were not responding to the martial image of a black man but to black women who asserted their right to choose their labor. They feared women assembled and exchanging stories and hashing out community disputes in a forum they could not control and in which they had no say.

⁵⁹ January 1867 broadside, *Families and Freedom*, 189.

⁶⁰ April 17, 1866 letter from M.C. Fulton to Freedmen’s Bureau, *Families and Freedom*, 187.

Of all the transformations that a slave woman hoped for in coming into a camp, foremost in her mind must have been the transformation of her reproductive labor. The law of maternal descent of slaves obliterated. Her children could be her own. If a pregnant woman coming into camp was something of a surprising sight for the Yankees watching her, it was less surprising to other camp women who knew well of masters sending babies and children further south with rumors of Yankees' approach: "they had refugeed her children off to different places to keep them from the Yankees. [She] couldn't get them back," recalled Lucretia Alexander of Arkansas.⁶¹ If we have characteristically viewed the black Union soldier as serving his country and tugging his family with a legal lariat along with him into freedom, we could unsettle that paradigm with a look to the black mothers who staked all to give birth out of slavery's reach.

Along with the recruitment effort came the effort to make black women into "soldier's wives." The marriage certificate could be just as revolutionary in symbol and action as the Union gun, but like the Union gun, it came with its own caveats and created problematic normative models for freedom. Coming at an ironic time, when military service forced physical separation between men and women, many black women squeezed themselves into a Procrustean bed, sometimes creating legal unions as "mere forms" to secure legal emancipation.⁶² But most of women's daily choices were performed out of the presence of husbands (paper or real), and they were designed with the custody of their children in mind. In many contexts, the claims to children became disputes over moral authority. Black southern women often found that authority in the identity "mother." So that many petitions to the government from women assert not a wage labor identity nor a relation to a soldier, but simply that claim as "mother." If we have looked to the political struggles of freedpeople in the records of the Freedmen's Bureau, we

⁶¹ *Voices from Slavery*, 11.

⁶² This was especially true in Kentucky, where slavery remained legal and prevalent until December 1865. "Rev. Thomas James, 1804-1891. Life of Rev. Thomas James, by Himself," n.d. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jamesth/jamesth.html> (Accessed January 31, 2012.)

should also see the successes they won closest to home as the ones that they resolved themselves, and ones the Bureau had no flexibility to comprehend. When the Bureau awarded custody to an enlisted (and consequently absent) father (whose sister would then take in the boy) on the basis that the mother was a “prostitute” who had taken up with another man, the father returned, and after a series of discussions between a network of relations, subsequently signed letters for the boy to return to his mother. It was this woman’s ability to convince her child’s father and her community that she was the best possible parent that won her her son.⁶³

American slavery has been described as an ongoing war it took a war to end. It seems such a fitting image then to have the slave end his bondage with a gun. Certainly, the military metaphor became useful for southern black communities as they looked for symbols to unite and mobilize in the reconstruction period.⁶⁴ But for many ex-slaves, it was not the soldier who most defied the image of a slave, but the parent having an unassailable right to her child. For many ex-slaves who imagined southern land could be theirs, it was not the gun but the axe that could make their way. And to many former slaves, life in the service felt more like a curtailment of their freedom than a school for it. If the suddenness of the transformation, soldier-to-citizen, is what makes it seem so revolutionary, it is also what makes it problematic analytically. Because it masks the evolution of communities in the war and their achievements in reconstructing cultural worlds outside of the master’s hegemony. Military necessity overwhelmed political expediency to make a legal revolution. Asking if it could have happened any other way risks a turn into the unpleasant exercise of historical counterfactuals best left to Civil War uchronia enthusiasts. But if slaves were the force behind freedom, they did not achieve it by the Union gun alone. We have only just begun to uncover the other forces at work.

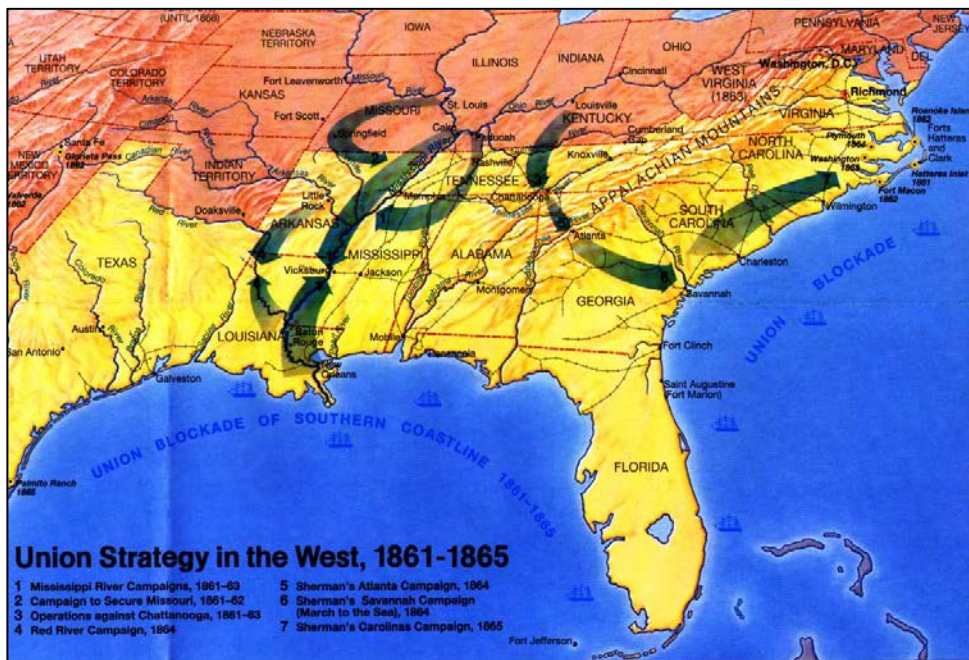
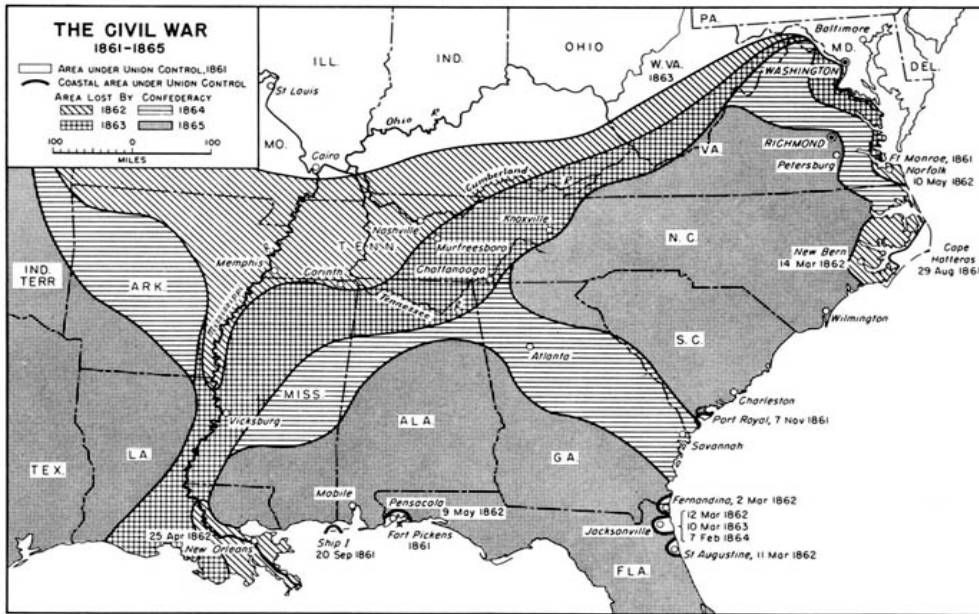
⁶³*Families and Freedom*, 201-205.

⁶⁴ See Hahn, *Nation Under Our Feet*, Chapter 4, especially 174-175.

APPENDIX:

Civil War Maps

Source: Virginia Center for Digital History, University of Virginia
<http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/HIUS323/occupation.htm> (Accessed Jan. 31, 2012.)
 Americancivilwar.com, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior
http://americancivilwar.com/civil_war_summary.html (Accessed Jan. 31, 2012.)



While further study is still necessary to chronicle and map systematically the locations of the camps, the figures shown here offer the reader a general sense of the areas under consideration. In the first map, contraband camps dotted the landscape within the areas under Union control. Recruiting efforts correlated with military movements portrayed in the second map.

Table of Black Soldiers in the Union Army

Source: Ira Berlin, et al, eds. *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Volume 1, Series II: The Black Military Experience* (Cambridge: 1982), p. 12.

Table 1. Black Soldiers in the Union Army and Black Male Population of Military Age in 1860, by State

State	Black male population, ages 18 to 45			Black soldiers	
	Free	Slave	Total	Number credited to the state	Percentage of black men ages 18 to 45
<i>Northern free states</i>			272	104	
Maine	272	—	103	125	
New Hampshire	103	—	140	120	
Vermont	140	—	1,973	3,966	
Massachusetts	1,973	—	1,760	1,764	
Connecticut	1,760	—	809	1,847	
Rhode Island	809	—	10,208	4,125	
New York	10,208	—	4,866	1,185	
New Jersey	4,866	—	10,844	8,612	
Pennsylvania	10,844	—	1,823	3,269	
District of Columbia ^a	1,823	—	7,161	5,092	
Ohio	7,161	—	2,219	1,537	
Indiana	2,219	—	1,622	1,811	
Illinois	1,622	—	1,622	1,387	
Michigan	1,622	—	292	165	
Wisconsin	292	—	61	104	
Minnesota	61	—	249	440	
Iowa	249	—	126	2,080	
Kansas	126	—	46,150	37,723	
Subtotal	46,150	—			
Black soldiers recruited in Confederate states but credited to Northern free states ^b				(5,052)	
Total				42,671	71
<i>Union slave states</i>			3,886	954	25
Delaware	3,597	289	31,257	8,718	28
Maryland	15,149	16,108	21,167	8,344	39
Missouri	701	20,466	41,935	23,703	57
Kentucky	1,650	40,285	98,245	41,719	42
Total	21,097	77,148			
<i>Confederate slave states</i>			101,428	5,919 ^c	6
Virginia	9,309	92,119	60,170	5,035	8
North Carolina	5,150	55,020	72,320	5,462	8
South Carolina	1,522	70,798	12,159	1,044	9
Florida	131	12,028	84,402	3,486	4
Georgia	583	83,819	84,336	4,969	6
Alabama	391	83,945	85,907	17,869	21
Mississippi	130	85,777	78,753	24,052	31
Louisiana	3,205	75,548	36,202	47	(less than 1)
Texas	62	36,140	23,110	5,526	24
Arkansas	22	23,088	51,209	20,133	39
Tennessee	1,162	50,047	689,996	93,542	
Subtotal	21,667	668,329			
Black soldiers recruited in Confederate states but credited to Northern free states ^b				5,052	
Total				98,594	14
<i>Other areas</i>	2,041 ^d	2,041	5,991 ^e	178,975	21
Total for all areas	90,955	745,477	836,432		

Note: The percentage of each state's black military-age population that entered the army is merely an approximation, because fugitive slaves frequently enlisted in regiments outside their home states (the number of black soldiers credited to Kansas and the District of Columbia, for example, was notably swelled by such enlistments), and other population movements make the 1860 census figure somewhat inadequate for comparison with enlistment statistics. Because early Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island black regiments recruited throughout the North, state-by-state computation of population percentages for the free states would be misleading; hence, only a regional percentage is given.

^aCongress had already ended slavery in the District of Columbia at the time these population figures were compiled.

^bEnlisted under the act of July 4, 1864, that permitted Northern state agents to recruit blacks in the Confederate states. See *Official Records*, ser. 3, vol. 5, p. 662.

^cVirginia, 5,723; West Virginia, 196.

^dCalifornia, 1,918; Oregon, 38; Colorado, 5; Nebraska, 15; Nevada, 27; New Mexico, 16; Utah, 5; Washington, 17; Colorado Territory, 95; state or territory unknown, 5,896.

^eSource: Population figures come from a report by the Superintendent of the Census, based upon the 1860 census (see pp. 87-88); the number of black soldiers credited to each state is given in the 1865 report of the Bureau of Colored Troops (*Official Records*, ser. 3, vol. 5, p. 138).