

Fugitive slaves persisted in their attempts to reach Union lines during the Civil War. This picture was taken in Virginia in August 1862. Courtesy: Library of Congress.



Writing Freedom's History: The Destruction of Slavery

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Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie Rowland, and Julie Saville*

The beginning of the Civil War marked the beginning of the end of slavery in the American South. At first most white Americans denied what would eventually seem self-evident. With President Abraham Lincoln in the fore, federal authorities insisted that the nascent conflict must be a war to restore the national union and nothing more. Confederate leaders displayed a fuller comprehension of the importance of slavery, which Vice-President Alexander Stephens characterized as the cornerstone of the Southern nation. But if Stephens and others grasped slavery's significance, they assumed that the Confederate struggle for independence would require no change in the nature of the institution. A Southern victory would transform the political status, not the social life, of the slave states; black people would remain in their familiar place. Despite a vigorous dissent from Northern abolitionists, most whites—North and South—saw no reason to involve slaves in their civil war.

Slaves had a different understanding of the sectional struggle. Unmoved by the public pronouncements and official policies of the federal government, they recognized their centrality to the dispute and knew that their future depended upon its outcome. With divisions among white Americans erupting into open warfare, slaves watched and waited, alert for ways to turn the military conflict to their own advantage, stubbornly refusing to leave its outcome to the two belligerents. Lacking political standing or public voice, forbidden access to the weapons of war, slaves nonetheless acted resolutely to place their freedom—and that of their posterity—on the wartime agenda. Steadily, as opportunities arose, they demonstrated their readiness to take risks for freedom and to put their loyalty, their labor, and their lives in the service of the Union. In so doing they gradually rendered untenable every Union policy short of universal emancipation and forced the Confederate government to adopt measures that severely compromised the sovereignty of the master. On both sides of the line of battle Americans came to know that a war for the Union must be a war for freedom.

The change did not come easily or at once. At first Union political

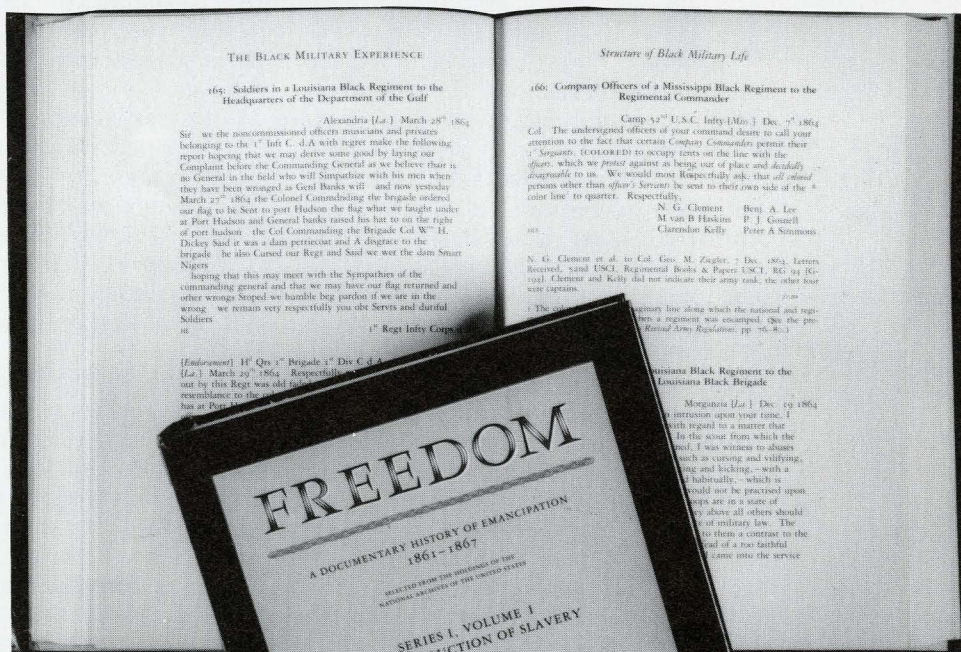
PROLOGUE

and military leaders freed slaves only hesitantly, under pressure of military necessity. But as the war dragged on their reluctance gave way to an increased willingness and eventually to a firm determination to extirpate chattel bondage. The Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, and the enlistment of black soldiers into Union ranks in the following months signaled the adoption of emancipation as a fundamental Northern war aim, although that commitment availed little until vindicated by military victory. Even after the surrender of the Confederacy, slavery survived in two border states (Delaware and Kentucky) until the Thirteenth Amendment became part of the United States Constitution in December 1865.

While Union policy shifted in favor of emancipation, Confederate leaders remained determined to perpetuate slavery. But the cornerstone of Southern nationality proved to be its weakest point. Slaves resisted attempts to mobilize them on behalf of the slaveholders' republic. Their sullen, and sometimes violent, opposition to the

Confederate regime magnified divisions within Southern society, gnawing at the Confederacy from within. In trying to sustain slavery while fending off the Union army, Confederate leaders unwittingly compromised their own national aspirations and undermined the institution upon which Southern nationality was founded. In the end, the victors celebrated slavery's demise and claimed the title of emancipator. The vanquished understood full well how slavery had helped to seal their doom.

The war provided the occasion for slaves to seize freedom, but three interrelated circumstances determined what opportunities lay open to them and influenced the form that the struggle for liberty assumed: first, the character of slave society; second, the course of the war itself; and third, the policies of the Union and the Confederate governments. Although none of these operated independently of the others, each had its own dynamic. All three were shaped by the particularities of Southern geography and the chronology of the war. Together, they made the



Published volumes such as the ones below are the result of years of research, analysis, transcription, and annotation by documentary editors.

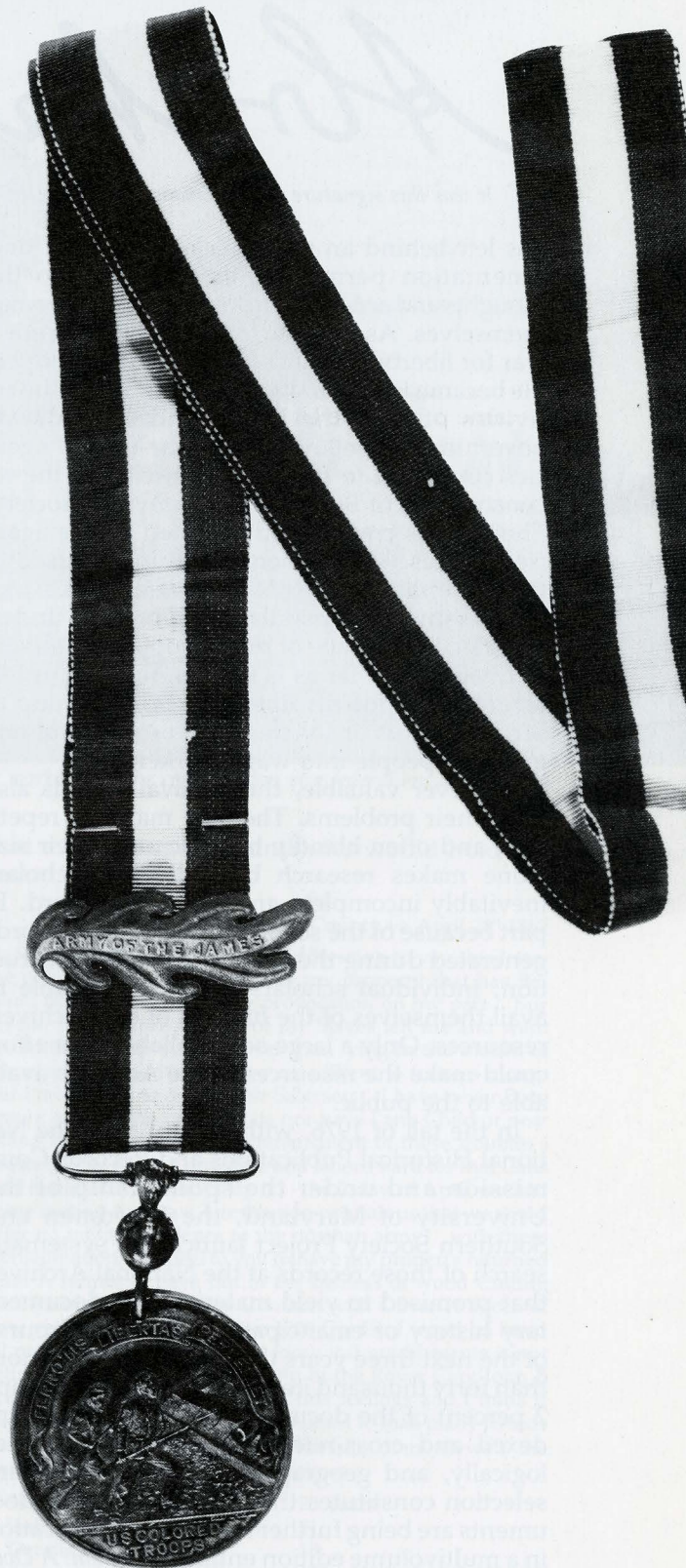
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destruction of slavery a varying, uneven, and frequently tenuous process, whose complex history has been obscured by the apparent certitude and finality of the great documents that announced the end of chattel bondage. Once the evolution of emancipation replaces the absolutism of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment as the focus of study, the story of slavery's demise shifts from the presidential mansion and the halls of Congress to the farms and plantations that became wartime battlefields. And slaves—whose persistence forced federal soldiers, Union and Confederate policymakers, and even their own masters onto terrain they never intended to occupy—become the prime movers in securing their own liberty.

With emancipation in the South, the United States enacted its part in a world-wide drama. Throughout the western world and beyond, the forces unleashed by the American and French revolutions and by the industrial revolution worked to undermine political regimes based upon hereditary privilege and economic systems based upon bound labor. Slavery had already succumbed in the Northern states and in the French and British Caribbean before the American Civil War, and it would shortly do so in its remaining strongholds in Spanish and Portuguese America. Almost simultaneously with the great struggle in the United States, the vestiges of serfdom in central and eastern Europe yielded to the pressure of the age. Only small pockets in Africa and Asia remained immune, and their immunity was temporary. The fateful lightning announced by the victorious Union army was soon to strike, if it had not already struck, wherever men and women remained in bonds of personal servitude.

Because they thrust common folk into prominence, moments of revolutionary transformation have long occupied historians seeking to solve the mysteries of human society. Knowledge of the subordinate groups who have formed the majority throughout history has proved essential to an understanding of how the world works. Moments of revolutionary transformation expose as at no other time the foundations upon which societies rest. While those who enjoy political power and social authority speak their minds and indulge their inclinations freely and often, their subordinates generally cannot. Only in the upheaval of accustomed routine can the lower orders give voice to the assumptions that guide their world as it is and as they wish it to be.

Encompassing in full measure the revolutionary implications of all transitions from bondage to freedom, emancipation in the American South



Many former slaves fought valiantly for the Union during the Civil War. Above is a medal given to "colored troops."

Abraham Lincoln

It was this signature on the Emancipation Proclamation that formally freed the slaves in the Confederate states.

has left behind an unparalleled wealth of documentation permitting direct access to the thoughts and actions of the freed men and women themselves. As the war for the Union became a war for liberty, the lives of slaves and freedpeople became increasingly intertwined with the activities of both the Union and Confederate governments. Following the war federal agencies continued to figure prominently in the reconstruction of Southern economy and society. The records created and collected by the agencies of these governments and now housed in the National Archives of the United States provide an unrivaled manuscript source for understanding the passage of black people from slavery to freedom. As far as is known, no comparable record exists for the liberation of any group of serfs or slaves or for the transformation of any group of people into wage workers.

However valuable, the archival records also have their problems. They are massive, repetitive, and often blandly bureaucratic. Their size alone makes research by individual scholars inevitably incomplete and often haphazard. In part because of the scope of government records generated during the Civil War and Reconstruction, individual scholars have been unable to avail themselves of the fullness of the Archives' resources. Only a large-scale collaborative effort could make the resources of the Archives available to the public.

In the fall of 1976, with a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and under the sponsorship of the University of Maryland, the Freedmen and Southern Society Project launched a systematic search of those records at the National Archives that promised to yield material for a documentary history of emancipation.¹ Over the course of the next three years the editors selected more than forty thousand items, representing perhaps 2 percent of the documents they examined. Indexed and cross-referenced topically, chronologically, and geographically, this preliminary selection constitutes the basis from which documents are being further selected for publication in a multivolume edition entitled *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*.

Reflecting editorial interest in a social history of emancipation, the documents selected for

publication in *Freedom* illustrate processes which the editors believe to be central to the transition from slavery to freedom. The first two series concentrate primarily upon the years of the Civil War. Series 2, *The Black Military Experience* (published in 1982) examines the recruitment of black men into the Union army and the experiences of black soldiers under arms. The two volumes that constitute Series 1—*The Destruction of Slavery* and *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*—together portray the wartime transformation of Southern life. *The Destruction of Slavery* explicates the process of emancipation in the portions of the South occupied by the Union army, in the Union's own border slave states, and in the shrinking Confederacy. Its companion volume, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, will discuss wartime reconstruction behind Union lines. The documents that follow are drawn from *The Destruction of Slavery*, which was published at the end of 1985.

Following the editorial practice of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, the documents are transcribed exactly as written, with no correction of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or syntax. Extra space marks the end of unpunctuated sentences.

I

President Abraham Lincoln summoned soldiers to preserve the Union, not to destroy slavery. Desiring to reassure wavering unionists in the slave states, particularly the loyal border states, Lincoln promised that the Northern army would respect the property rights of slaveholders. In the early months of the war, federal commanders hewed close to the administration's policy. Writing to the Union general in command at St. Louis, a Missouri unionist reiterated what seemed self-evident at the onset of war: the sectional conflict would not disturb slavery.

Saint Louis Mo. May 14, 1861

.....
Last evening, a gentleman, of the highest respectability, and intelligence, from Greene county, Mo. asked me whether I supposed it was the intention of the United States Government to interfere with the institution of negro slavery in Missouri or any Slave State, or impair the security of that description of property. Of course, my answer was most



This watercolor painting by a Union soldier depicts black laborers working on the construction of a federal encampment in Virginia.

unqualifiedly, and almost indignantly in the negative. I told him that I had no means of forming an opinion which were not open to every other private citizen; but that I felt certain that the force of the United States, would, if necessary, be exerted for the protection of this, as well as any other kind of property. Will you be good enough to spare from your engrossing military duties so much time as may be required to say whether I answered correctly?

I have the honor to be, with the highest respect, your most obedient Servant.

(Sgd) Thomas T. Gantt.²

Excerpt from Thomas T. Gantt to Brig. Gen. W. S. Harney, May 14, 1861, vol. 2/8 DMO, pp. 202-203, Letters Sent, ser. 5481, Dept. of the West, Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Record Group 393, National Archives. (Hereinafter cited as RG___, NA.)

II

The president's pledge did not last. In the spring of 1861, Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, stationed at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, accepted runaway slaves as "contraband" of war, putting the able-bodied men to work on federal fortifications. Soon after, Congress passed the First Confiscation Act and thereby allowed federal officers to receive any slaves who had been employed in Confederate service. A Virginia slaveholder discovered that such distinctions mattered little to his slaves, who valued their liberty above their owner's loyalty. He hoped

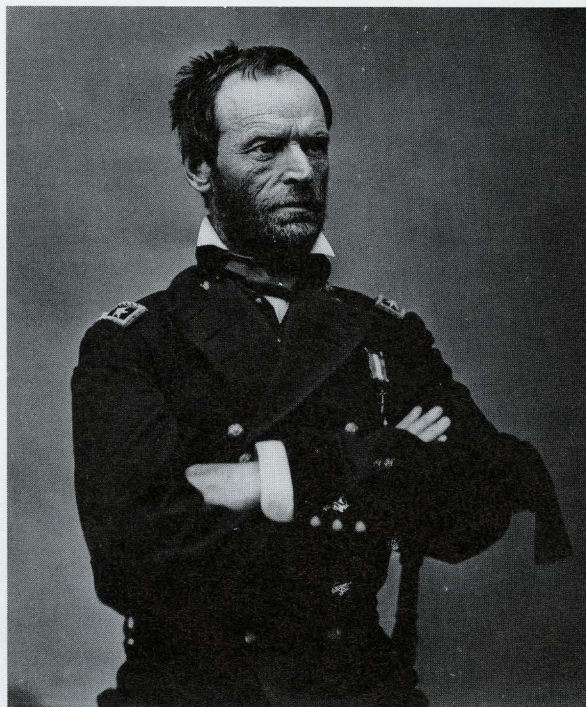
that a Union navy commander would hold different priorities.

Lancaster County va April 28th 1862

Dr Sir I take the priviledge of addressing to you this letter the object of which is to recover my property that has Bin taken from me with out any provocation on my part Sur on the 7th of April 1862, 7 of my Slaves left me and went on Bord the Ship young Rover then lying in the mouth of the rapahannock river & have sens [S]ent to fortress monro Sur I am A private & peasable Satersen I have never Born armes Against the united Stats nor have I any Child or near friend who has in the Commensment of these troubles I voted for the union Candidate and labord hard for that Caus and made many Enemys By it the 2 day of April we had some meting And past A resolution unanamus that we wood offer no millitary defence to the northan army with these Considerations I appeal to you to have my property returned I am A farmer & have Bin in the Bisness of wood Cutting for 5 years & have A large Contract with Oliver H Booth of new york At this tim I have 1200 Cords of wood on hand all ready for market But must loose it if my Survants is not returned I have Seen the Captin of the Rover Capt John B Studnal he is A gentleman of fine feelings and I think if this property is returned he is calculated to mak many friends to the union he is perfectly in posession of my views the Survants I lost th names are as folows

Sharlott	woman	23 years
Isah	young man	21
Dennis		18
Emma		16
Laurinda		15
margrett		13
& Charles A blind Boy of 23		

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William T. Sherman used fugitive slaves as laborers whenever possible.

A woman I hired from Aolfin Child & too small Children Isabellar minney moses & A man I hired from mrs Cundif name Mack Kelly Sur you Compliments will greatly oblige you obedient Surv

B. B. McKenny

PS I think my negroes shold Be returned becaus tha were taken after the order was ishued to take nomore & at the time thear was not A man in lancaster in arms Against the federl Army I hope Sur if you Can you will return my negroes if you Cant Pleas forward this to the propper authorites B. B. McKenny

B. B. McKenny to Comdr. Wyman, Apr. 28, 1862, enclosed in Comdr. R. H. Wyman to Hon. Gideon Welles, May 2, 1862, Potomac Flotilla, Letters from Officers Commanding Squadrons, Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library, RG 45, NA.

III

As long as the Confiscation Act alone dictated the terms by which slaves might legally exit slavery, it provided slaves in most places but slight access to freedom. Nevertheless, fugitive slaves continued to present themselves at Union lines. After federal troops moved into Kentucky in September 1861 the Union generals in that state presumed it their duty to return runaway slaves to their owners. Many Northerners—both in and out of the ranks of the Union army—doubted the wisdom of returning fugitives to owners who might then employ them in the Confederate ser-



George B. McClellan also saw distinct advantages to the use of fugitive slave labor.

vice. A Michigan Quaker urged the secretary of war to consider the effects of this military policy on the slaves and on the Union war effort.

Battle Creek [Mich.] Decr 5th 61

Freind Camron a Fugitive from Tenesee a few nights Since on his way to Canada Informed me that it is the Settled Intention of the Rebels to Ere Long Arm the Slaves throughout the Entier South put them in the front Ranks to Receive the fier & then Storm the Federal works in all points. he Sais its Talked of in all the Rebel Familys. Declaring that Every Slave Shall first be Butchered before the Rebels will give up he Sais that Tens of Thousands of Slaves are in the greatest Alarm their masters telling them that our officers & Army will Sell them to Cuba & that 5 Slaves that was Sent over from Kentuckey by our Federal Troops Say that the ware Badly Treated by our officers altho the offered to work or Fight for the Government. but ware told to Clear out that the officers wanted no D--D Niggers about them &c &c & ware actually Driven over to their old Homes. he Sais too that there is not a Slave South but would Take up arms for our Troopes if the Could, but the Treatment the Receive has almost Sett them Crasy. the Expected Friends of us in Stead of Enemy's the are Coming through here Constantly on their way to Canada. now what a picture is this. is our Relatives to be Butcherd as the Are & we to add fuel to the Flames of the Rebels to Continue the Destruction. oh Can it be that this Government is to Crush 4000000 of Human beings. to uphold the most Blood Thirsty Sett of Tyrants on Earth. your Document³ is greatly approved of, and if the Administration Dont put a Stop to the Ill Treatment of the Slaves by our Army I greally fear that we will be the Loosers thereby— I think that matter Cannot be Seen to, to Soon for I am Satisfyed that the Rebels will Resort to any Atrocious acts to Carry their points— Very Truly Yours

H. Willis

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H. Willis to Freind Camron [Simon Cameron], Dec. 5, 1861, W-443 1861, Letters Received, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, RG 107, NA.

IV

Slaves' persistent attempts to reach Union lines complicated what once seemed a simple matter of observance of the fugitive slave law (and the corollary policy of excluding fugitives from federal encampments). Slaveowners who pursued fugitives to a Union camp demanded rendition and slaves begged for protection. A Missouri slaveowner discovered the new spirit with which soldiers might resist proslavery appeals after an additional article of war adopted by Congress in March 1862 prohibited the employment of Union soldiers in returning fugitive slaves to their masters. His attempt to enlist the secretary of war in recovering two runaway slaves proved just as unavailing as his complaints to local union officers: It failed even to elicit a reply.

Syracuse Morgan County Missouri April 5th 1862

I feel great delicacy my dear Sir, in taking the liberty, of addressing you, on a matter entirely personal; being unknown to you and to fame: But having been reared under our glorious representative government, I have ever rejoiced in the fact, that the humblest individual might respectfully present himself before our Rulers. On the 25th of Jan^{ry} as Gen^l Davis command passed through our town on its march to Springfield two of my most valuable Negro Boys joined the Regiment of Co^l Julius White The command camped for the night near Tipton—I saw Gen^l Davis that night: and was assured by him that they should be excluded from the lines He had the kindness to give me a letter to Co^l Cummings: The next morning finding that my Boys were in Co^l Whites command I saw him & introduced myself to him & stated my business & at the same time placed in his hands Gen^l Davis' letter: He Co^l White told me positively he would have nothing to do with it: I said surely he would comply with the order of Gen^l Halleck: when he again stated positively he would have nothing to do with it: The army then being on the march I rode on with my Son: as we passed one of the Boys was in a wagon: when we reached the head of the column I found the other Boy with knapsack & Gun; I asked for the Capt of the advance guard & stated to him my business: The man came forward and took his property, & I ordered the Boy to follow us: we had gone but a few paces before we met Co^l White: I stopped & most respectfully told the Co^l There was one of my Boys, the other behind in a wagon: The Co^l stopped gave me a stern, defiant look but said not a word: seeing that, I passed on: my Son made the Boy get up behind him: we had passed but a few paces from Co^l White until a yell was raised, behind us where we left the Co^l sitting on his horse we were instantly surrounded by several hundred armed men, threatening us with instant death; two of them seized the Boy pulled him from the Horse & ran him back to where we had left Co^l White: They then commenced stoning us, & stoned us so long as we were in reach of their Stones: We got out of their reach as soon as practicable but were pursued by two Officers on horse back with drawn Swords forced back & put under a guard of Soldiers & ropes were called for to hang us. Now Sir as the army was here to meet men in arms & for the protection of loyal citizens in life liberty & property: I felt that the onus of recovering my Negroes rested upon me, and proceeded

with all due respect to every one to do so: But was glad to escape with my life from Co^l White: The facts were forthwith reported by me to Gen^l Halleck & I urged my prayer that my Boys might be ordered back into my hands: I have written him repeatedly & have never had a direct reply: I have just received a letter from my friend in St Louis who has been urging my claim: He says Gen^l Halleck refuses to act in the case: says it does not come under his jurisdiction: I have written to the Hon^{ble} Garret Davis & to Gen^l T. L. Price begging that a request or an order, if need be, might issue from the President himself the head of all power, to Gen^l Halleck that my Boys might be ordered back into my hands I have stated that I ask it as a constitutional right, & as a rebuke to the outrage upon my person & property: I ask it farther because a large part of the hard earnings of my laborious life, is in my Negro property, to all of which a death blow has been struck & lastly I ask it because I raised those Boys am greatly attached to them, and consider that they have entered upon a career of ruin as they are very young, & know nothing of the world: I am dear Sir respectfully & most truly yours

John R. Moore

If my dear Sir you will give me your kind assistance you will confer a favour, never to be forgotten. I have just received a letter from Gen^l Price telling me that he could not make the application to the President requested by me Now my dear Sir what am I to do, unless I can get redress through you: I had thought of addressing a copy of this application to the Pres^{nt} also; but think that will be unnecessary as you will if need be do me the favour to confer with him: I think the case so aggravated that you will do me the kindness to order my Boys back into my hands, or to my Agent: One of those Boys is the eldest son of a family of thirteen: The Parents are old and if thrown upon the world could not sustain themselves: the Boy was just now of an age to aid in the support of his large family

I have been greatly distressed at the conduct of Co^l White, as I ardently desire the restoration of our glorious Union as we received it from our Fathers: His conduct has had its influence for evil; is a strong reason why I wish that my Boys may be restored to me: Please let me hear from you immediately, as they have now been gone upwards of two months: Co^l White is under the command of Gen^l Curtis: you will ever have my fervant prayer, that your efforts may be crowned with success, in the reestablishment of peace, and that we may soon again, be a united happy people most respectfully yours John R Moore

John R. Moore to Hon. E. M. Stanton, Apr. 5, 1862, M-455 1862, Letters Received, RG 107, NA.



V

As Union troops advanced southward into the Confederacy in 1862, the army's growing appetite for laborers wore upon the policy of ex-

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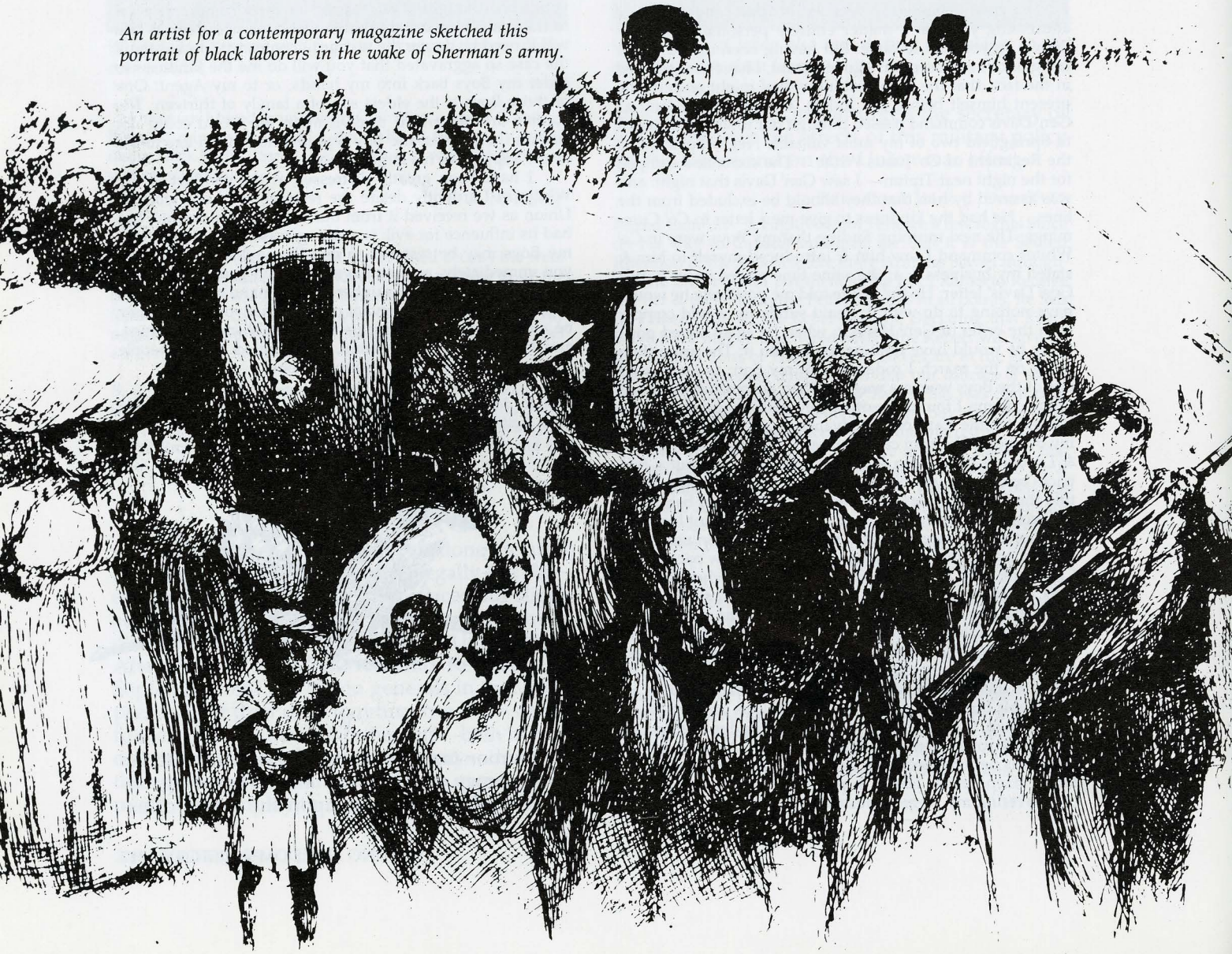
cluding fugitive slaves from federal lines. The Militia Act of July 1862, which authorized the president to employ "persons of African descent" in any capacity to suppress the rebellion (and freed the slaves of disloyal masters so employed), and the Second Confiscation Act, adopted the same day, proved to be turning points in the Union army's acceptance of fugitive slaves and utilization of black laborers. Even Union officers personally disinclined to interfere with slavery came to understand that each able-bodied fugitive slave represented one laborer gained for the Union and one lost for the Confederacy. As Gen. William T. Sherman explained to a Tennessee slaveholder who had been a West Point classmate, military exigency took precedence over personal feelings.

Memphis Tenn. Aug 24th 1862

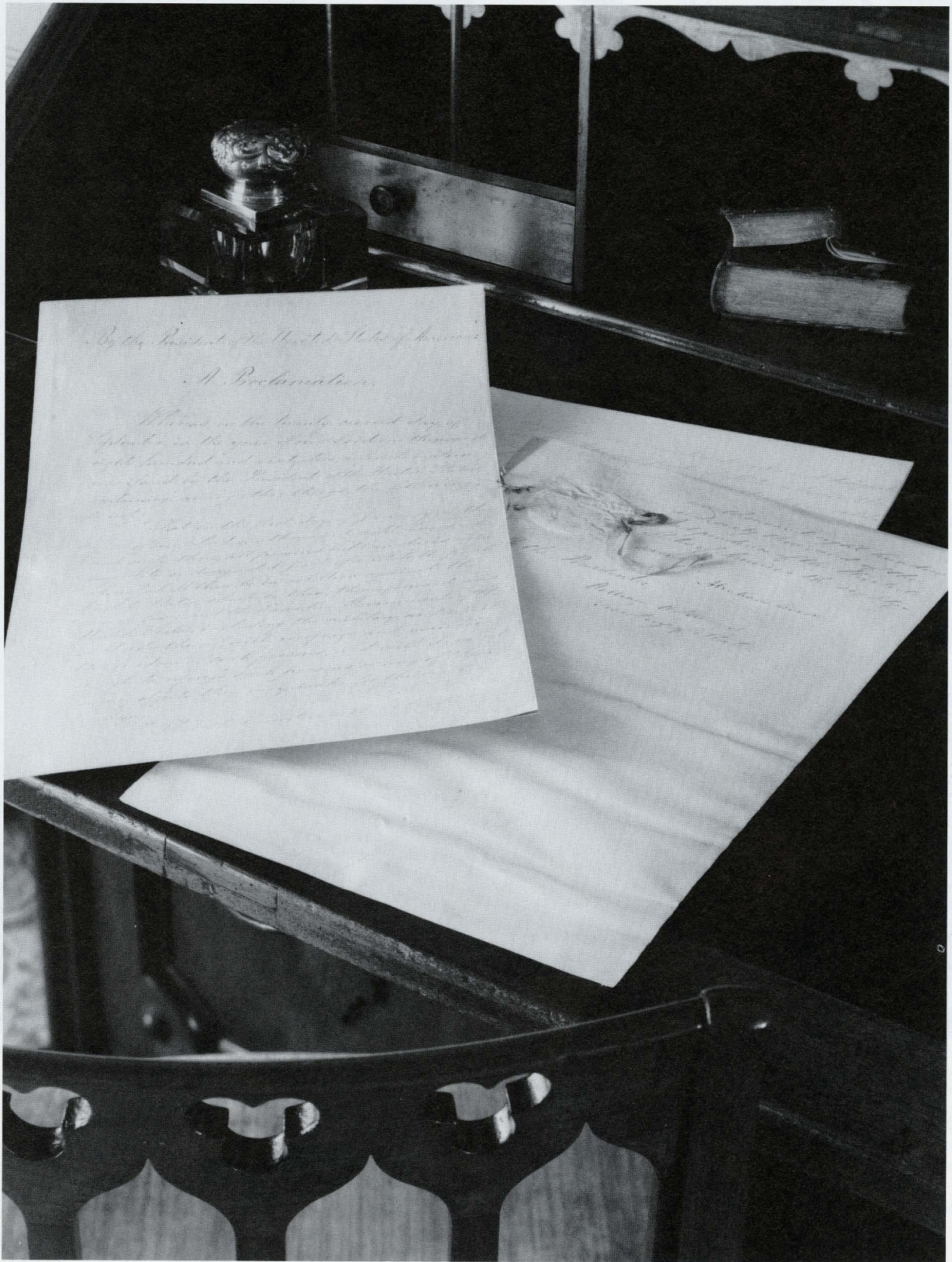
My dear Sir, I freely admit that when you recall the times when we were schoolfellows, when we were younger than now, you touch me on a tender point, and cause me to deeply regret that even you should style yourself a Rebel. I

cannot believe that Tom Hunton the companion of Gaither, Rankin, and Irvin and many others long since dead, and of Halleck. Ord, Stevens and others still living can of his own free will admit the anarchical principle of secession or be vain enough to suppose the present Politicians Can frame a Government better than that of Washington Hamilton & Jefferson. We cannot realize this but delude ourselves into the belief that by some strange but successful jugglery the manegers of our Political Machine have raised up the single issue, North or South, which shall prevail in America? or that you like others have been blown up, and cast into the Mississippi of Secession doubtful if by hard fighting you can reach the shore in safety, or drift out to the Ocean of Death, I know it is no use for us now to discuss this—war is on us. We are Enemies, still private friends. In the one Capacity I will do you all the harm I can, yet on the other if here. you may have as of old my last Cent, my last shirt and pants, You ask of me your negroes. and I will immediately ascertain if they be under my Military Control and I will moreover see that they are one and all told what is true of all— Boys if you want to go to your master, Go— You are free to choose, You must now think for yourselves. Your Master has seceded from his Parent Government and you have seceded from him—both wrong by law—but bothe exercising an undoubted natural Right to rebel, If your boys want to go, I will enable them to go, but I wont advise, persuade or force them— I confess I have not yet seen the "Confis-

An artist for a contemporary magazine sketched this portrait of black laborers in the wake of Sherman's army.



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In September 1862 President Lincoln announced his plans to emancipate the slaves of states still in rebellion on January 1, 1863. Above is the final version of the famed Emancipation Proclamation.



Beginning in the fall of 1862, blacks were recruited for service in the Union army. This military service, as portrayed above,

cation Act," but I enclose you my own orders defining my position, I also cut out of a paper Grant's Orders, and I assert that the Action of all our Leading Military Leaders, Halleck, McClellan, Buell, Grant & myself have been more conservative of slavery than the Acts of your own men. The Constitution of the United States is your only legal title to slavery. You have another title, that of possession & Force, but in Law & Logic your title to your Boys lay in the Constitution of the United States. You may say you are for the Constitution of the United States, as it was— You know it is unchanged, not a word not a syllable and I can lay my hand on that Constitution and swear to it without one twang.

But your party have made *another* and have another in force How can you say that you would have the old, when you have a new By the new if successful you inherit the Right of Slavery, but the new is not law till your Revolution is successful. Therefore we who contend for the old existing Law, Contend that you by your own act take away Your own title to all property save what is restricted by *our* constitution, your slaves included. You know I don't want your slaves; but to bring you to reason I think as a Military Man I have a Right and it is good policy to make *you all* feel that you are but men—that you have all the wants & dependencies of other men, and must eat, be clad &° to which



was invaluable to the Union cause.

end you must have property & labor, and that by Rebelling you risk both, Even without the Confiscation Act, by the simple laws of War we ought to take your effective slaves. I don't say to free them, but to use their labor & deprive you of it; as Belligerents we ought to seek the hostile army and fight it and not the people.— We went to Corinth but Beauregard declined Battle, since which time many are dispersed as Guerillas. We are not bound to follow them, but rightfully make war by any means that will tend to bring about an end and restore Peace. Your people may say it only exasperates, widens the breach and all that, But the longer the war lasts the more you must be convinced that we are

no better & no worse than People who have gone before us, and that we are simply reenacting History, and that one of the modes of bringing People to reason is to touch their Interests pecuniary or property.

We never harbor women or children—we give employment to men, under the enclosed order. I find no negroes Registered as belonging to Hunton, some in the name of M^cGhee of which the Engineer is now making a list— I see M^cClellan says that the negroes once taken shall never again be restored.⁴ I say nothing. My opinion is, we execute not make the Law, be it of Congress or War. But it is Manifest that if you wont go into a United States District Court and sue for the recovery of your slave property You can never Get it, out of adverse hands. No U.S. Court would allow you to sue for the recovery of a slave under the Fugitive Slave Law. unless you acknowledge allegiance. Believing this honesty, so I must act. though personally I feel strong frindship as ever, for very many in the South With Great Respect Your friend

W. T. Sherman

Maj. Gen. W. T. Sherman to Thomas Hunton, Esq., Aug. 24, 1862, vol. 3, pp. 51–53, Letters Sent, W. T. Sherman Papers, Generals' Papers & Books, ser. 159, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's–1917, RG 94, NA.

VI

The free-born can perhaps never know the triumph and the pain felt by the slave who gained liberty. A Maryland slave husband drank the intoxicating wine of freedom even to its bitter dregs.

Upton Hill [Va.] January^{the} 12 1862

My Dear Wife it is with grate joy I take this time to let you know Whare I am i am now in Safety in the 14th Regiment of Brooklyn this Day i can Adress you thank god as a free man I had a little truble in giting away But as the lord led the Children of Isrel to the land of Canon So he led me to a land Whare fredom Will rain in spite Of earth and hell Dear you must make your Self content i am free from al the Slavers Lash and as you have chose the Wise plan Of Serving the lord i hope you Will pray Much and i Will try by the help of god To Serv him With all my hart I am With a very nice man and have All that hart Can Wish But My Dear I Cant expreas my grate desire that i Have to See you i trust the time Will Come When We Shal meet again And if We dont met on earth We Will Meet in heaven Whare Jesas ranes Dear Elizabeth tell Mrs Own[ees] That i trust that She Will Continue Her kindness to you and that god Will Bless her on earth and Save her In grate eternity My Acomplements To Mrs Owens and her Children may They Prosper through life I never Shall forgit her kindness to me Dear Wife i must Close rest yourself Contented i am free i Want you to rite To me Soon as you Can Without Delay Direct your letter to the 14th Reigment New york State militia Uptons Hill Virginea In Care of M^r Cranford Comary Write my Dear Soon As you C Your Affectionate Husban Kiss Daniel For me

John Boston

Give my love to Father and Mother

John Boston to Mrs. Elizabeth Boston, Jan. 12, 1862, enclosed in Maj. Gen. Geo. B. McClellan to Hon. Edwin Stanton, Jan. 21, 1862, A-587 1862, Letters Received, ser. 12, RG 94, NA.

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VII

In September 1862 President Lincoln announced his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. He promised to declare "then, thenceforward, and forever free" all the slaves in states still in rebellion on January 1, 1863. That same fall the enlistment of black men into Union regiments slowly commenced. As the momentous first day of January approached, alarmed slaveholders in the Union-occupied parishes of southern Louisiana discovered that black soldiers and plantation slaves intended to wield the force of the proclamation even in an area that Lincoln would declare exempt from its provisions.

[*St. John the Baptist Parish, La.*]
22nd [21st] day of December AD 1862

Be it known, that on this day the Twenty first day of December AD 1862, before me, P. B. Marmillion, Sheriff of the Parish of S^t John the Baptist, State of Louisiana, personally came and appeared D^r Gustave Chabaud and J. Burcard, residing in the Said Parish, who after being duly sworn depose and Say

That the presence in the lower Parishes of S^t Charles, S^t John the Baptist and S^t James, of the regiments known as the Second Native Guards under the Command of Col. N. W. Daniels, is detrimental to the interests of Said parishes and has had for effect the entire and effectual demoralisation of the Servile population in Said parishes—and that the lives of families and inoffensive citizens is in danger, from the threats and actual misconduct of Said regiments; that without order or authorisation written—and in Some cases verbal—they have entered private houses, taken and carried away property, valuables &^{cr} and have at divers and Sundry times Completely robbed and Carried away goods and properties belonging to private persons, inoffensive and loyal—that without authorisation they have disarmed the loyal citizens of Said parishes—have stolen watches from Said citizens, and run about during the night without discipline or order, and incite the quiet Servile population to revolt and cruel treatment toward their masters; that the depredations along the coast are So numerous that it is impossible to enumerate them now, but are of Such a nature as to render the parishes untenable to the inhabitants of Said parishes, who are loyal citizens of the United States, as every person, or very nearly So, from the lower end of S^t Charles to the upper one of S^t James, has taken the oath of allegiance required by Gen Butler.

Almost every day acts of violation of domicile & property have taken place and have been committed by the Soldiers of Said regiment, unaccompanied by any white officer; the Same being done on denunciations of Slaves and Sometimes even without any denunciation at all.

Eleven inhabitants of Said Parish, have been illegally arrested by them, taken down in a Cart to the Boutte Station and insulted by the Said Soldiers during the whole distance Say about 20 miles, kept at Said Station for many days

The names of Said persons are J. B. Haydel: Valcour Haydel: [Clarifeux] Faucheux; Octave Borne; Justin Becnel; Prémilieu Becnel, Sévérin Lonpre, Séraphin Lonpre; and two inhabitants of Said parish, fathers of family to wit: Florian Bertolle et Jean Bertolle have been without any Cause and upon the denunciation of one of their own Slave girls, who had previously abandoned the house, been arrested, Sent to New Orleans and are now in the Jail of Said Parish.

Colonel Daniels upholds this monstrous State of things and refuses to listen to the Just demands of the loyal citizens of Said Parish.

This week, three carts loaded with Slaves arrived from Boutte Station, Shrieking threats, singing and exciting to insurrection, and mentioning Christmas as being the time Set for the emancipation of Slaves

Furthermore, that Col Daniels has illegally charged and charges the Sum of \$2 for the taking of the Oath to all loyal citizens disposed to return to their allegiance to the United States, and has charged \$5 for a permit to carry arms and hunt, and from \$5 to \$10 for Passes; all of which are in direct violation of the order of the General Commanding this Department.

They therefore would request that the Said regiment of Native Guards be withdrawn from their Said Parish and that their own Sheriff be appointed Provost Marshall, and hereby request him, in the name of all the inhabitants of Said Parish, that this, their demand, be by him transmitted to the Commanding General at New Orleans:

J. Burcard
G. Chabaud

Affidavit of J. Burcard and G. Chabaud, Dec. 21, 1862, C-90 1862, Letters Received by the Provost Marshal General, ser. 1390, State of LA, Provost Marshal Field Organizations, RG 393, NA.

VIII

Black men and women who took refuge in "contraband camps" and other settlements behind Union lines did not rest satisfied with their own liberty. Like former slaves in many parts of the Union-occupied Confederacy, black military laborers in eastern Virginia organized a return trip home to liberate families and friends. They were accompanied by a detachment of black soldiers, whose brigade commander reported the outcome of the dangerous expedition.

Newport-News, Va. Sept. 1st, 1864.

Sir, I have the honor to report that some Government employees (colored) came up here from Fort Monroe and Hampton Hospitals, having been allowed a short leave of absence for the purpose of getting their families if possible. I told them I had no boats, but would help them with men. They reappeared the next day with sailboats. I sent with them a Captain and 15 men (dismounted Cavalry). The families were in and about Smithfield. I gave them strict instructions to abstain from plundering—to injure no one if possible—to get the women and children merely, and come away as promptly as possible. They were to land in the night. They followed these directions closely: but became delayed by the numbers of women and children anxious to follow, whom they packed in extra boats, picked up there, and towed along. They also had to contend against a head tide, and wind calm. So that their progress down Smithfield Creek in the early morn was exceedingly slow. The inhabitants evidently gathered in from some concerted plan of alarm or signals. For, 3 miles below, the party were intercepted by a force of irregular appearance, numbering about 100—having horses and dogs with them;—armed variously with shot guns, rifles, &c, and posted behind old breastworks with some hurried additions. They attacked the leading boats, killed a man and woman, and wounded another woman therein. The contrabands then rowed over to the opposite bank and scattered over the marshes. How many more have been slaughtered we know not. Two (2) men have since

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escaped to us singly.— When the rear boats, containing the soldiers, came up, the Captain landed, with the design of attacking the rebels. But then the firing revealed their full numbers. He found they outnumbered him, more than 6 to 1, and that the *Revolvers* of our Cavalry, in open boats or on the open beach, would stand no chance against their rifles behind breastworks. He embarked again, and they made their way past the danger, by wading his men behind the boats, having the baggage and bedding piled up like a barricade. They then had a race with 3 boats, which put out from side creeks to cut them off. But for the coolness and ingenuity of Capt. Whiteman, none would have escaped. None of the soldiers are known to have been severely wounded; but 3 are missing in the marshes and woods. We have since learned that there are signal Stations in that neighborhood—which ought to be brooken up. I would also earnestly recommend the burning of a dozen or 20 houses in accordance with *your* General Order No. 23.⁵ Very respectfully Your obt. Servant

Edw^d A. Wild

Brig. Gen. Edwd. A. Wild to Brig. Gen. G. F. Shepley, Sept. 1, 1864, Dept. of VA & NC, Records of Other Military Commands, ser. 731, War Records Office, RG 94, NA.

IX

The final Emancipation Proclamation and the full-scale recruitment of black men into the federal army in the spring of 1863 marked the transformation of the war for the Union into a war against slavery. As federal forces threatened ever larger expanses of the Confederacy—particularly after the fall of Vicksburg in July 1863—many slaveholders attempted to remove their most valuable slaves from the war front. Sometimes Confederate officials ordered the forced evacuation of slaves to prevent their flight to Union lines. But, as a Mississippi planter informed the Confederate secretary of war, such shotgun migrations often failed to accomplish their purpose. Rather than secure slave property, they became the occasion for its loss.

Washington County Miss November 3^d 1863

Dear Sir I was told to day that you had commissioned A. M. Paxton Esq as Major for the express purpose of coming into the Island formed by the Yazoo and Miss Rivers, to remove all of the able bodied men and women, mules and stock of every description, leaving only the old decrepid men



This "store for freedmen" was established in Beaufort, South Carolina, so blacks could purchase dry goods and other necessities.

CIRCULAR.

**Office Provo. Mar., 2d Sub. Dist., Mo.,
Hannibal, Dec. 17th, 1863.**

By the terms set forth in General Order No. 135, dated Nov. 14th 1863, it is made the duty of Provost Marshals and Assistants to enlist all able-bodied Colored men, of suitable age, into the U. S. Service, &c. I desire to call attention of the citizens of the District to the necessity of using their best efforts in bringing in such as desire to enlist and in making it known through the District that I am fully prepared to enlist and send forward all able-bodied Colored volunteers that may be offered.

By orders from Provost Marshal General Col. Fry, all persons who bring in an accepted recruit, will be entitled to a fee of \$2.00.

The people of the District should be energetic in this matter, as every Colored recruit furnished the Government will leave us one white man, free from the coming draft. All parties or persons found recruiting or persuading Colored men for Regiments out of the State, will be arrested and imprisoned, and their cases submitted to Head Quarters of the Department of Missouri.

**A. B. COHEN, Major,
and Ass't Provost Marshal.**

Circulars and broadsides such as the one above were used to present the case for black enlistment. Every black man in uniform spared a white man from battle.

and women and the children— The reason assigned by you was, that by doing so, it would prevent the Yankees from getting them and thus weaken them to that extent— If you were here upon the spot you would see the utter impracticability of accomplishing it— Instead of weakening the Yankees the very first lot of negroes taken by surrounding the quarters, which would be the only way to secure even one lot, there would be a stampede of all the balance, who would take every mule with them to the Yankees— Some three months since M^r J. W. Vick had his quarter surrounded and his men all taken to the hills— Since that time the negroes have been very shy of our Soldiers and only within the last month all the negro men on the Creek laid out for about ten days while they were in here collecting cattle— The report came before them that they were taking all the men for the army and the consequence was all the men laid out for over a week and many were scared off entirely to the Yankees— There are over one hundred and ninety negroes on this place, I have never thought or talked about moving them, and had not lost one by running off until the scare about a month ago when four men and a woman left— I am the only one as far as my acquaintance extends who had not either attempted to or were preparing to move and every one who did so lost nearly if not all of the men and many of the women and children— I believe every negro on this place will go the Yankees before they would go to the hills, and at same time think they have made up their minds to stay at home and wait the issue of events if they

are permitted to do so— I believe it utterly impossible for major Paxton to be successful in such a measure, but the result will be the running off the negroes now on the plantations and the mules they would steal and the making of bad citizens of good ones, who will view the measure as intolerable oppression— There were many persons who ran with the residue of their negroes to the hills, who found it impossible to live and either have or are returning to their homes— I write to you because I can make myself known to you, when I tell you, that I am the brother of M^{rs} Martha Stanard the widow of Rob^t C. Stanard both of whom I know esteemed you as a friend— I have not the value of one dollar interested in the measure and if you want disinterested testimony I have given it to you and you can take it for what it is worth Yours truly

Jon'a Pearce

Jon'a Pearce to Hon. Jas. A. Seddon, Nov. 3, 1863, P-366 1863, Letters Received, ser. 5, Secretary of War, War Department Collection of Confederate Records, RG 109, NA.

X

The increase in federal military activity in a shrinking Confederacy provoked slaveholders

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to tighten plantation discipline, making escape more difficult and punishment more severe. A former Tennessee slave revealed the consequences of his failed attempt to reach federal lines.

Memphis, Tenn., Sept 13th 1865.

Statement of Archy Vaughn. Last spring [1864] I was living with *Bartlet Ciles* about 8 miles from Somerville—near M^cCulloughs and one eving some Confederate soldiers or Guerillas came along and he told me to feed their horses. and I was at the barn gitting corn. and staid longer than he thought I should and when I went back to the house—he told me he was going to whip me in the morning— that night I took an old mare and went to the ferry across Wolf River. I was going to Laffayette Depot to get into the federal lines and Andrew Johnson who lives close to the ferry. took me and kept me until Billy Simons came along and he gave me to him to carry me back to Bartlet Ciles. When he Ciles took me down to the woods, and tied my hands, and pulled them over my knees and put a stick through under my knees. and then took his knife and *castrated* me and then cut off the lop of my left ear, he made a colord man named Dallas help hold me— he drove me off from his plantation some time in June—I think.

his
Archy X Vaughn
mark

Affidavit of Archy Vaughn, Sept. 13, 1865, Affidavits & Statements, ser. 3545, Memphis TN Provost Marshal of Freedmen, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, RG 105, NA.

XI

As a loyal slave state, Maryland did not fall within the purview of the Emancipation Proclamation. Nevertheless, as in the other border states, slavery deteriorated, rumors of freedom circulated, and slaves tested the limits of their owners' authority. A slave woman in northern Maryland, in doubt about where matters stood, wrote directly to President Lincoln for clarification.

Belair [Md.] Aug 25th 1864

Mr president It is my Desire to be free.to go to see my people on the eastern shore. my mistress wont let me you will please let me know if we are free. and what i can do. I write to you for advise. please send me word this week. or as soon as possible and oblidge.

Annie Davis

Annie Davis to Mr. president [Abraham Lincoln], Aug. 25, 1864, D-304 1864, Letters Received, ser. 360, Colored Troops Division, RG 94, NA.

XII

Slavery lasted longer in Kentucky than in any other state except Delaware. Many of the state's slaves claimed freedom on the basis of a parent's or husband's military service once Congress pro-

vided in March 1865 for the emancipation of wives and children of black soldiers. The mother of a Kentucky slave soldier left her wartime employment in Tennessee and returned to her home state before ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in December 1865—without Kentucky's concurrence—officially ended American slavery.

State of Tennessee Montgomery County
19th day of September 1865

I Minerva Banks (at one time called Minerva Summers) on oath say that I am the mother of Charles Banks Co. "H" 101st U.S.C. Inf who died Dec. 5. 1864.

That since Christmas 1863 I have made Tennessee my home and since my said son—Charles enlisted as a soldier I have regarded myself as free & have been so informed and believe it to be true. I worked as Cook in the Engineer Dept at Nashville and received a discharge in these words:

"Engineer Department Nashville Tenn. May 4 1865
Minerva Sommers (colored) in the employ of this Department owing to General Orders is hereby discharged
(Signed) J. W. Barton Capt U.S. Eng^r in Charge of Defences"

1st June 1865 Lawyer Davis at Cadiz Trigg Co Ky hired me, but his wife was always unkind to me & abused me so that I was compelled to leave and I then hired to Mr W. H. Martin who lives 3 miles North from Cadiz and received from him a writing in these words

"I will give Mary Banks seven Dollars & 50 cents per month for the ballance of the year and pay her at the end of each month—she to clothe herself

June 12 1865 (signed) W. H. Martin"

I had been to work there but a few days when Edward Sommers my former master who lives about 2 miles from Hopkinsville—came to Mrs Martin's with Dr Russell who brought a gun & threatened to shoot me if I offered to resist or run, Sommers at first being hid. Somers then came up with a large whip & accosted me saying he was afraid he would have to die before seeing me as he wanted to live to give me one good thrashing— Sommers then took me off from the house about 1/2 mile into the woods. He then took the bridle rein from his buggy & hung me up by the neck for some time & then took me down & compelled me by force to strip *naked* & then tied my hands to a limb of the tree so that my feet but just touched the ground. then cut limbs from the trees with which he scourged me for a long time whipping me from my head to my feet cutting some severe gashes & among some of the injuries inflicted he broke one of my fingures with the but end of his heavy whip—

I worked for said Martins until about Sept 1st when he informed that he would not pay me any thing as he was obliged to pay my wages to Mr Sommers—

I have the original papers the copies whereof are above recited—

The above has been carefully read over to me & before God I solemnly swear that it is true & that I left that Country for fear of my life— All my things such as bed Clothes & are or were left at Mr Martins—

her
Minerva X Banks
mark

Affidavit of Minerva Banks, Sept. 19, 1865, enclosed in Buck & McMullen to Brig. Gen. C. B. Fisk, Sept. 19, 1865, B-128 1865,

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Registered Letters Received, ser. 3379, Tennessee Assistant Commissioner, RG 105, NA.

XIII

When slavery fell—whether it be with escape to Union lines, the flight of fugitive masters, or the enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation—black people made haste to give meaning to their liberty. Months before a new state constitution ended slavery in Maryland on November 1, 1864, a Maryland former slave wrote the secretary of war of his determination to reunite his family and to define a new free status for himself and his people.

Boston July 26th 1864

Dear Sir I am Glad that I have the Honour to Write you a few line I have been in trouble for about four yars my Dear wife was taken from me Nov 19th 1859 and left me with three Children and I being a Slave At the time Could Not do Anny thing for the poor little Children for my master it was took me Carry me some forty mile from them So I Could Not do for them and the man that they live with half feed them and half Cloth them & beat them like dogs & when I was admitted to go to see them it use to brake my heart & Now I say agian

I am Glad to have the honour to write to you to see if you Can Do Anny thing for me or for my poor little Children I was keap in Slavy untell last Novr 1863. then the Good lord sent the Cornel borne [Birney?] Down their in Marland in worsester Co So as I have been recently freed I have but letle to live on but I am Striveing Dear Sir but what I went too know of you Sir is it possible for me to go & take my Children from those men that keep them in Savery if it is possible will you pleas give me a permit from your hand then I think they would let them go I Do Not know what better to Do but I am sure that you know what is best for me to Do

my two son I left with Mr Josep Ennese & my litle daughter I left with Mr Iven Spence in worsister Co [. . .] of Snow hill

Hon sir will you please excuse my Miserable writing & answer me as soon as you can I want get the little Children out of Slavery, I being Cripel would like to know of you also if I Cant be permitted to rase a Shool Down there & on what turm I Could be admitted to Do so No more At present Dear Hon Sir

John Q A Dennis

Hon Sir will you please direct your letter to No 4 1/2 Milton St Boston mass

John Q. A. Dennis to Hon. Stan, Edwin M. Stanton July 26, 1864, D-1049 1864, Letters Received, RG 107, NA. □

THE CONSCRIPT BILL! HOW TO AVOID IT!!

U. S. NAVY.

1,000 MEN WANTED, FOR 12 MONTHS!

Seamen's Pay,	- - - - -	\$18.00	per month.
Ordinary Seamen's Pay,	14.00	“ “
Landsmen's Pay,	12.00	“ “
\$1.50 extra per month to all, Grog Money.			

Conscription into the Union army was necessary to sustain troop strength. The navy proposed sea duty as an alternative to combat in the battlefields of the south.

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NOTES

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¹For a fuller description of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, see Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, "Writing Freedom's History," *Prologue*, 14 (Fall 1982), pp. 129–130; and *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, ser. 2: *The Black Military Experience*, ed. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland (1982), pp. xv–xxii.

²Gen. William S. Harney, commander of the Department of the West, promptly confirmed Gantt's understanding of the federal government's slavery policy: "I should as soon expect to hear that the orders of the Government were directed towards the overthrow of any other kind of property as of this in negro slaves." (Brigadier General [William S. Harney] to Thomas T. Gantt, Esq., May 14, 1861, vol. 2/8 DMO, pp. 203–204, Letters

Sent, ser. 5481, Dept. of the West, RG 393, NA.)

³Secretary of War Simon Cameron's controversial annual report of Dec. 1, 1861, which advocated employing slaves on behalf of the Union war effort—including arming them for military service—and freeing all those so employed. President Lincoln forced Cameron to delete the recommendation to arm and free slaves. (Edward McPherson, *The Political History of the United States of America, during the Great Rebellion*, 2d ed. [1865], p. 249.)

⁴On Aug. 9, 1862, Gen. George B. McClellan, commander of the Army of the Potomac, issued an order promulgating President Lincoln's executive order of July 22, which instructed the federal armies operating in rebellious states to seize property suitable for military purposes and to employ slaves. McClellan added that slaves employed by the Union army "have always understood that after being received into the military service of the United States in any capacity they could never be reclaimed by their former holders," and he promised such slaves "permanent military protection against any compulsory return to a condition of servitude." (U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. [1880–1901], ser. 1, vol. 11, pt. 3, pp. 362–364.)

⁵On August 20, 1864, Gen. George F. Shepley, commander of the District of Eastern Virginia, ordered that Confederate guerrillas thereafter captured in North Carolina north of Albemarle Sound and south and east of the Chowan River were to be treated as spies and not prisoners of war, and that citizens who aided the guerrillas would be imprisoned and (with permission from his headquarters) their houses burned. (General Orders No. 23, Head Quarters, District of Eastern Virginia, Aug. 20, 1864, Orders & Circulars, ser. 44, RG 94, NA.)

⁶Illegible word.

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Blacks were an important part of the navy as well as the army. Above is the crew of the gunboat *Hunchback* on the James River in 1864.