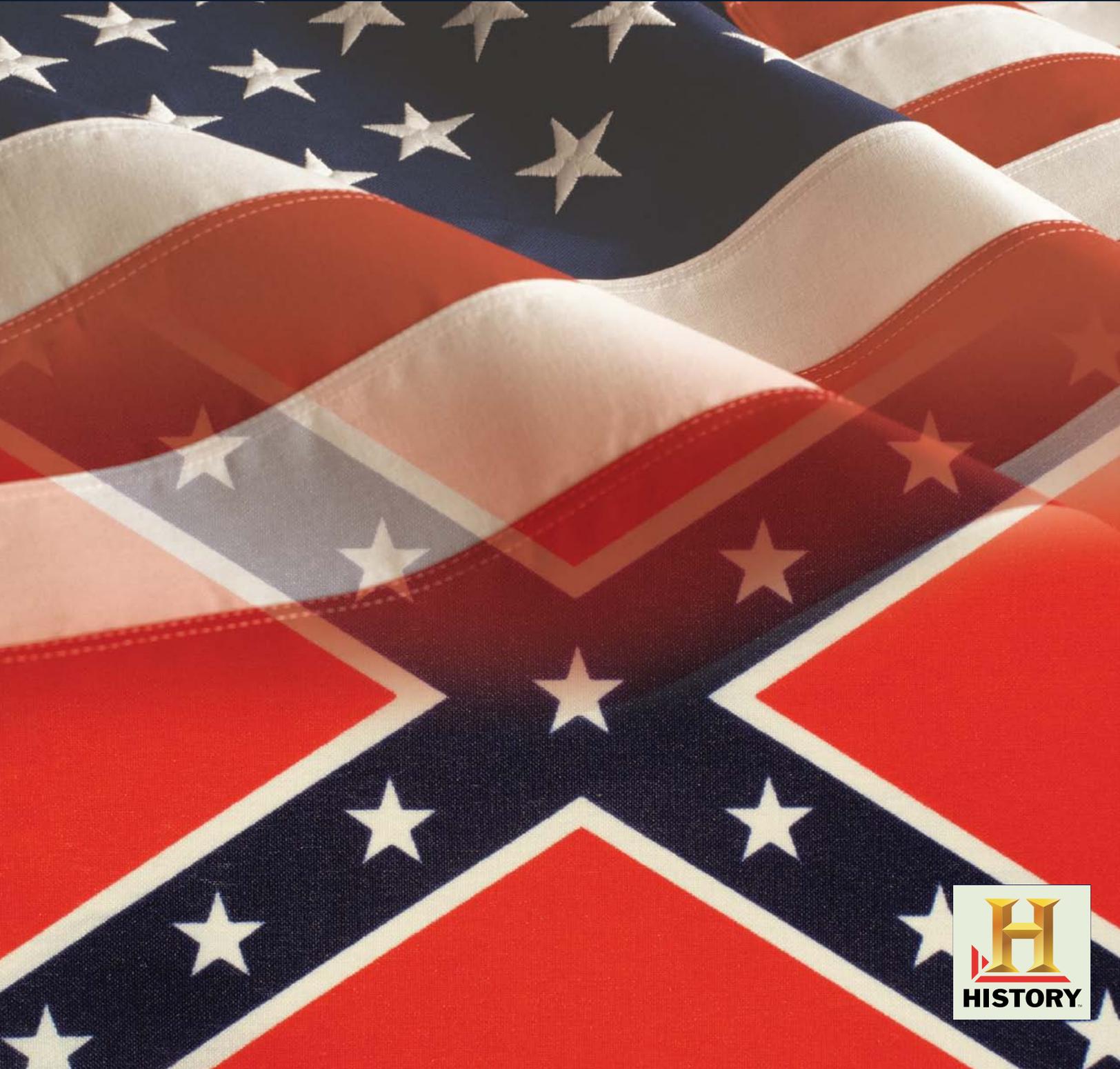


TEACHING THE  
**CIVIL WAR**  
IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY



Teaching the Civil War in the 21st Century

National History Day and HISTORY™ Teacher Resource Book 2011

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## **Dear Educators,**

HISTORY™ and National History Day are excited to bring you the latest scholarship in teaching the American Civil War. Susan O'Donovan, the lead historian on the project, has invited renowned Civil War historians to share their research in a series of provocative and perhaps even perplexing essays. Their contributions challenge us to think about the Civil War in fresh ways. They complicate the Civil War era by expanding the universe of historical actors, adding women and slaves, for instance, to a history long dominated by white men and soldiers. The contributors push us to change our historical perspectives and to ask new questions of one of the most foundational moments in our national history. Was the Civil War inevitable? Where do slaves fit into the story? Where were the battlefields, who were the combatants, what were the moral and ideological stakes? And above all, how should we remember a war that cost hundreds of thousands of lives and nearly destroyed a nation? New questions give rise to new understandings. But new understandings require new research and the final two articles in this collection are designed to launch that research process. HISTORY™ provides, for instance, a list of some of the newest media, books and websites available to support student research and classroom teaching. The National Park Service demonstrates how both students and teachers can extract new information and new understanding from Civil War historical sites. These are not the only avenues of historical inquiry, nor do they exhaust the possible resources, but when combined with the scholarly essays, HISTORY™ and the National Park Service provide excellent starting points.

## **National History Day Connection**

One way, of course, to extend that teaching and research is through National History Day. National History Day is a year-long program that encourages middle school and high school students to engage in scholarly historical research with an emphasis on forming an interpretation of the past supported by extensive research of primary and secondary sources.

The Civil War can be explored from a variety of perspectives, and lends itself to countless questions. It is a flexible topic of study, and thus appropriate for nearly every NHD annual theme, including 2011's Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History and 2012's Turning Points in History. Beginning with the materials in this resource, students might explore the role of black Americans—both slave and free—in the waging and outcome of the war. Others may want to focus their attention on women and investigate how the war changed women's lives or how women may have influenced the outcome of the war. Still other students may be attracted to the problem of memory and why the stories we have told of the war have been so different in different times and places. The fruits of these projects as well as the countless others our students may imagine can be presented as websites, documentaries, performances, exhibits, or papers. Moreover, as the essays in this collection demonstrate, the study of the Civil War is not likely to go stale soon. It contains mysteries enough to keep our students busy for decades to come. Good history begets good questions, which means that new research and new knowledge are always forthcoming. Developing those new understandings through research is, of course, what National History Day is all about.

**Happy Researching! Susan and Ann**

# TEACHING THE CIVIL WAR IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By Susan Eva O'Donovan

It used to be a simple matter to teach our students about the Civil War. Lessons usually depicted a war that played out exclusively on battlefields. Teachers and texts talked about the war in binary terms: North and South, Blue and Gray, Johnny Reb and Billy Yank. With very few exceptions, it was a man's war that school children learned about, and a white man's war at that. But those days have passed. To paraphrase the old Virginia Slims ad, we've come a long ways baby. Scholarship on the Civil War era has exploded since the 1970s. Influenced by debates over civil rights, the women's movement, and America's role in the Vietnam War, we have raised and continue to raise a host of new questions about a war that killed 620,000 and liberated 4,000,000 more. For instance, the same feminist struggle that persuaded a tobacco giant to market to women as well as to men prompted historians to look more closely at women's experiences in the Civil War era. A fight to secure civil and political rights to black Americans similarly prompted scholars to re-examine the turbulent era of Reconstruction in which black Americans had first won and then lost those same rights a century earlier. As the war in Vietnam spilled onto American soil in the form of student protests, historians began to think differently about war's boundaries. Was the conventional battlefield the most appropriate unit of analysis, we began to wonder, or had Mark Twain been right when he observed the war's long reach? Wars do not end with soldiers dead on the field of battle, Twain wrote in "The Private History of a Campaign that Failed." The weight of war sweeps far and wide, invading soldiers' homes and falling on their wives and children too.<sup>i</sup>

As scholars sought answers to these questions and others, they began to realize that the Civil War could not be contained in the categories that had framed discussions since the late 1800s. All it took was a quick glimpse into the holdings of the National Archives to convince historians that the war was about a whole lot more than Johnny Reb, Billy Yank, and places known as the North and the South. In fact, the more historians pored over primary sources and the more of those sources they studied, the more they realized those old binaries had stopped us from seeing a much bigger, more complicated, and messier Civil War.

That conventional Civil War history, one that we can still find at commemorative sites, on the Internet, and in many museums, is not incorrect. What happened when armies collided and cannons blasted mattered, and it mattered in significant ways. But as the contributors to this volume suggest, that old story is only a part of the story. In different ways, Matthew Gallman, Daniel Sutherland, and I help to expand the pantheon of Civil War actors. Joining other scholars who have been exploring the roles of Native Americans, new immigrants, and Northern wage workers in the Civil War era, our essays push beyond what even the remarkable Twain could imagine. We invite readers to consider how women, slaves, and Confederate irregulars complicate that older Civil War narrative. No longer relegated to the margins of a revolutionary drama, the people to whom we draw attention were both shaped by and in turn helped

to shape what some have described as America’s defining moment. In other words, the women who forged new roles for themselves during war, the slaves who pushed emancipation onto the Union wartime agenda, and the partisans whose irregular tactics prompted the Union to wage a “total war,” were as much architects of the nation that emerged from the Civil War as were the soldiers who gave their lives on fields of battle.

The more historians expanded their analytical field of vision, the more they began to call into question some of the most enduring features of the conventional Civil War history. Even ideas as seemingly fundamental as “The North” and “The South” have begun in recent years to break down under scholars’ scrutiny. As Seth Rockman explains in his essay, the more attention we pay to the historical details—who did what, where, when, and why—and the more we attempt to locate the Civil War in a larger historical context, the more improbable the war becomes. After all, as Rockman and Leslie Schwalm remind us, slavery had long been a national problem. Indeed, when Abraham Lincoln launched his 1860 presidential campaign, the institution had barely breathed its last in New York and New Jersey. Cotton, too, was a national problem. It was the most prominent thread in a tightly woven economy that connected Mississippi planters, Alabama slaves, Connecticut shoemakers, and New York financiers. The historical scholarship on which these essays rest has raised a whole new set of issues and as it becomes harder to distinguish between antebellum “North” and “South” we are left wondering, Rockman observes, why the war came at all.

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If the new scholarship is making us rethink the war’s actors and origins, it is forcing an even greater reconsideration of the war’s place in national memory. How should we think about a war in which the least powerful launched some of the most politically radical acts? How should we think about a war in which white Yankees were as fearful of black freedom as Confederate slaveholders? How, in fact, should we think about what was the bloodiest war in our history? In the decades following the Confederate surrender, Americans—black and white—struggled to come to terms with the war. For most of them, it meant discarding the war’s emancipationist dimension and downplaying

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its subversion of conventional gender relations. But even those who celebrated the war as a story of black liberation helped to promote the notion of the Civil War as a good war, a patriotic war, a righteous war. But, asks W. Fitzhugh Brundage, what happens when

we direct our attention to the awful carnage that war left behind? Can we recollect and commemorate as a good war one that came at such awful cost? In the concluding paragraph of the final essay, Brundage admits what strikes him most is “not that Americans have concluded that the Civil War was a just and necessary war ... but that so few Americans have been interested in exploring the contrary possibility.”

Brundage’s question is one of the freshest and bears the imprint of a post-9/11 nation. It ends the collection on a deeply provocative note but also an appropriate one, for as the essays included here suggest, the wider we cast our scholarly net and the more carefully we probe the primary sources, the more questions we raise about the Civil War era. In this sense, Civil War history is, like any history, an ongoing process of inquiry. If all this collection does is prompt our students to raise their own questions—questions informed by the events that are shaping their lives—we will judge our work an unqualified success. Inquiry, after all, is the historian’s stock in trade. And as these essays indicate, it is in answering those questions that we can arrive at new knowledge about the Civil War and, more generally, about the human experience.

i “The Private History of a Campaign that Failed,” in *The American Claimant and Other Stories and Sketches*, by Mark Twain (New York, 1917), p. 278.

# AND THE WAR CAME

By Seth Rockman



Lacking President Lincoln’s rhetorical skill, most of us who teach American history in high school and college classrooms struggle to explain the origins of the Civil War. The poetic efficiency of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address conveys in four words what we typically spend weeks trying to accomplish: “... and the war came.” Yet our lesson plans often share the same dramatic arc of that famous speech of March 4, 1865: Whether by the divine hand that guided Lincoln’s rendition of events, or by the inexorable march of the semester that guides ours, war comes as the culmination of a conflict long in the making and seemingly unavoidable. Our uncritical use of the label “antebellum” for the preceding decades intensifies this sense of inevitability, as do textbook chapters that foreshadow the coming war in their contrast of a “free” North and a “slave” South. These texts frame the Civil War as one of monolithic sections, divergent paths, irrepressible conflicts... and the war came.

Recent scholarship has introduced more uncertainty to this story. This is not because historians think the war could or should have been avoided. Most scholars see ending slavery as a moral imperative for the nation and cannot imagine a peaceful means of doing so within a comparably short time frame. Nor is it because historians have substantial disagreements about the causes of the Civil War; whether placing emphasis on economic, political, or cultural factors, most agree with Lincoln (again in his Second Inaugural) that slavery “was somehow the cause of the war.” Rather, by considering the earlier decades of the nineteenth century as something other than merely “antebellum,” historians have complicated the coming of the Civil War in three distinctive ways. First, scholars are challenging the integrity of the “North” and “South” by investigating when these sectional labels came to be meaningful to the lived experiences of Americans residing in different parts of the country. Second, and not unrelated to the de-emphasizing of the sections, historians are examining slavery as a national institution, both in its economic importance and its power to shape lives thousands of miles away from the most concentrated areas of slaveholding. Finally, by identifying historical processes or epochs whose trajectories neither stopped nor started in the 1860s—industrialization and Victorian culture, for example—scholars are assimilating the Civil War into chronological schemes that may run from 1789, 1815, or 1830 all the way until 1890, 1900, or 1914. The cumulative result is a Civil War that seems at times more improbable than foreordained, and for that reason, much more interesting to study.

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### **The North and the South**

No one studying the wartime home fronts would proclaim the internal coherence of the Union or the Confederacy. Differing opinions about the war’s aims, its prosecution, and its costs generated substantial problems of governance and mobilization in both nations. In contrast, textbook accounts of the preceding decades almost always smooth

over the political differences within “the North” and “the South” in order to present two fully formed sections destined to come into conflict. But rather than taking these as preexisting entities, recent scholarship explores the uneven process by which the sections came into being. One historian has argued that there was no such thing as “the South” until the secession crisis of 1861; before that moment, there were many Souths, defined more by their differences than their commonalities.<sup>i</sup> A similar argument could be made for regional variation in the North, emphasizing the demographic and economic diversity of New England, the mid-Atlantic, and the Midwest, as well

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as diverging popular attitudes about slavery and the ability of the national government to curtail it. Even in 1860, two of every five northern voters cast ballots against the limited antislavery platform of the Republican Party. “North” and “South” are essential shorthand for explaining the fracturing of the American nation, but the sections they describe were hardly as homogenous or stable as these labels suggest.

It may seem counterintuitive to question the early existence of the sections. As early as the 1787 Constitutional Convention, it was clear that slavery constituted a distinct political interest within national politics.<sup>ii</sup> The debate over Missouri statehood in 1820 showed how readily Congressional voting could fall along sectional lines. However, the Missouri Compromise’s 36° 30’ line took slavery’s future expansion off the table as a subject of Congressional debate, and not long after, the rise of the Democrats and Whigs generated new political coalitions that bridged any sectional divide. By focusing attention on the federal government’s role in promoting economic development, what is known as the Second Party System revealed the shared political commitments of entrepreneurs or small farmers in places like Massachusetts and North Carolina, as well as the competing interests of those same groups within each state. In this light, the history of the so-called antebellum era is less about the hardening of preexisting sections and rather about their erosion.

Slavery itself failed to provide a clear demarcation, and in the years before the outbreak of war, the slaveholding states found themselves increasingly divided over the issue of slavery itself. The Upper South’s enthusiasm for the American Colonization Society and the project of exiling manumitted slaves to Liberia was met skeptically in places like South Carolina where leaders worried that

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federal funding of colonization would open the door to future interference with slaveholders' rights. The domestic slave trade bolstered the longevity of slavery in Maryland and Virginia but generated tensions with Deep South slaveholders leery of receiving insurrectionary castoffs from Upper South states. Issues like reopening the African slave trade provoked substantial disagreement among political commentators seeking to represent slaveholding as a progressive institution to an increasingly dubious international audience. Equally divisive was the larger question of whether slavery was better protected within or outside of the federal union; South Carolina's nullification attempt in 1832 (backed by the threat of secession) was hardly met with favor elsewhere in the South. While slavery would ultimately unify the South (or more accurately, the 11 of 15 slaveholding states that chose to enter the Confederacy), it created numerous divisions that would need to be overcome before places like Virginia, Louisiana, and South Carolina could find common political ground.<sup>iii</sup>

Divisions within individual southern states were as important as those between them. As proslavery ideologues looked aghast at the social disorder and class conflict of Northern cities, they conveniently overlooked several decades of political strife within nearly every state that would join the Confederacy. White egalitarianism was not an inherent feature of slaveholding societies, but a consequence of political struggle by yeomen who refused to be overtaxed, under-represented, or excluded from advantageous land opportunities by domineering slaveholders. A modicum of political equality came to non-slaveholding white men in Florida only after a major banking collapse provoked constitutional reform at the end of the 1830s. In South Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia, state politics were defined by rivalries between poorer upcountry districts and wealthier slaveholding districts along the seaboard. Not even secession generated political unanimity, and almost every state's effort to pass a resolution or ordinance resulted in what one scholar has called "a down-and-dirty political fight."<sup>iv</sup> It required hook and crook to approve secession in Georgia and Alabama, and the political process was completely bogged down in Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Tennessee until after the attack on Fort Sumter.

The halting birth of the Confederacy owed much to the fact that the Old South was actually quite new, with scarcely two generations of cotton cultivation in the states most quickly following South Carolina into secession. Defenders of slavery were eager to depict the plantation regime as a natural feature of the Southern landscape, yet frontier conditions predominated on lands only recently taken from the Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Osage, and other Native nations. There was little settled about vast stretches of Georgia, Florida, and Texas, a fact that architects of the Confederate nation masked in their depiction of a static paternalistic society imperiled by Northern aggression. The image of a South unified by timeless tradition was an ideological pose that erased a divisive history

of conflict in every seceding state and between different regions of the South as a whole.<sup>v</sup> Put differently, there was no monolithic South that marched in lockstep toward secession and certainly not one recognizable in the decades preceding the war itself.

The place we call the North was hardly more coherent. Most misleading is the notion that the region was solidified in its opposition to slavery. It is important to distinguish between the abolitionism of a small minority of activists who believed in the immediate end of slavery and the civic equality of people of color and the antislavery of a broader, if still minority, segment of the population who thought slavery to be questionable, but believed slaves (especially emancipated ones) and abolitionists to be equally dangerous to the nation. On whole, northern voters had little difficulty supporting slaveholders for the presidency, and were nearly unanimous in their belief that the federal government possessed no power to interfere with slavery where it already existed. Abolitionists were not very successful in changing public opinion, other than by eliciting so much hostility that many northerners came to see their own civil rights—to petition Congress, to use the mail, to claim habeas corpus protection—imperiled (if only in the abstract) by the need to protect slavery. Even though the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was a bitter pill for many northerners to swallow, President Millard Fillmore, a Whig from New York, signed it into law. Fillmore and the two northern Democrats, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan, who succeeded him in the Presidency conveyed a northern consensus that even Abraham Lincoln and his fellow Republicans would espouse: the Constitution protected slavery.

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If opposition to slavery failed to unite the North, so too did the pattern of economic development typically known by scholars as the Market Revolution. Presumably what made the North distinctive was its rapid embrace of capitalism, characterized by a landscape dotted with factories, banks, canals, and railroads, as well as growing cities populated

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by immigrants and wage laborers. Yet these changes were uneven and, more importantly, deeply divisive within northern society. The robustness of party competition in northern states offers one testament to competing visions of economic development, with Democrats suspicious of governmental action that privileged some economic actors over others and Whigs willing to risk inequality in the name of progress. American labor radicals did not need Marx to

perceive the irreconcilable interests of labor and capital, while other social commentators contended that dangerous disparities of wealth threatened political equality. Questions of voting rights and legislative apportionment generated violence in New York State (the Anti-Rent Wars) and Rhode Island (the Dorr Rebellion), but more typical was the informal mobbing that pitted native-born against immigrant and white against black in places like Boston, Providence, New Haven, and New York City. Problems like alcoholism, gambling, and prostitution became preoccupations for northern reformers who legitimately feared that their society was fragmenting.<sup>vi</sup>

Focusing on the instability of northern and southern society offers only one means of challenging the premature application of sectional labels. Another approach has been to re-map the terrain of the nineteenth-century United States according to economic networks, migration patterns, or cultural affiliations. The contiguous parts of Kentucky, southern Indiana, and Illinois might have been more meaningful as a geographical unit than “North” and “South” to many Americans, including the young Abraham Lincoln; likewise, the adjacent wheat-growing and iron-producing districts of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. A number of slaveholders centered their mental maps on the Caribbean, imagining a hemispheric plantation economy encompassing Cuba and Brazil.<sup>vii</sup> Enslaved men and women may have been more likely to locate freedom in Baltimore or New Orleans rather than Indiana or Pennsylvania; after the Fugitive Slave Act, many would have denied such as thing as a “free North” even existed, and looked instead to Canada for the prospect of liberation.<sup>viii</sup> An even more provocative map might identify New York City or Lowell, Massachusetts, as key locales in the American slaveholding regime. The recognition of slavery’s importance to northern life has most radically undermined the premise of a “free North” and “slave South” destined to go to war in 1861.

### **Slavery’s National Reach**

Over the last decade, the term “complicity” has gained traction as a description of the North’s relationship to slavery, especially its material interest in human bondage. Investigations have uncovered the role of Rhode Island ships in carrying enslaved Africans across the Atlantic, the investment of Philadelphia banks in Mississippi plantation lands, the underwriting of slave insurance policies by Connecticut corporations, and the leveraging of cotton profits by New York City trading firms.<sup>ix</sup> Hidden in plain sight has been the indispensability of slave-grown cotton to New England’s textile economy, an observation Charles Sumner made in the 1840s when he spoke of a conspiracy “between the lords of the lash and the lords of the loom.”<sup>x</sup> Textile factories and mill girls were central to what made the North distinctive, but the hum of the machinery owed largely to the availability of cotton and the labor of millions of enslaved African Americans on distant plantations. The economic integration of the industrializing North and the slaveholding South suggests that as slave labor became limited to a minority of states, it nonetheless

grew in importance to the economic ambitions of the nation as a whole. Cotton was indeed the most valuable product grown or manufactured in the United States.

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As a political entity, the United States was a “slaveholding republic.”<sup>xi</sup> Slaveholders dominated the key offices of the national government and ushered through a series of laws and legal decisions that invested federal power in the protection and expansion of slavery. The military program of Indian Removal made millions of acres of fertile lands available to slaveholders, while the annexation of Texas secured the rights of planters in a territory where the Mexican government had banned slaveholding only a decade earlier. Beyond overtly proslavery legislation like the Fugitive Slave Act, a much wider range of federal diplomatic maneuvers, litigation, and regulation served to protect property rights in human beings, culminating in the infamous Dred Scott verdict that denied Congress the power to exclude slaveholding from territories and opened the door to suits questioning the ability of individual states to prohibit slavery within their own boundaries.

The life of Dred Scott himself serves as a reminder of slavery’s presence far outside the boundaries of the South. Scott’s case owed to his one-time residence in Minnesota, a territory where slavery had been long outlawed. Yet Southerners regularly traveled to “free” states with slaves in tow. Slaveholders vacationed in Newport, Rhode Island,

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and made annual excursions to Cincinnati, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston to purchase provisions for their plantations. Indeed, that business sometimes transformed northern merchants into the legal owners of slaves when their southern customers went bankrupt and had their property distributed to creditors. Even under less dramatic circumstances, Northern makers of hats, hoes, and boots toured the plantation south on marketing expeditions or to research new opportunities to provide planters with cotton gins, steam engines, and even the bags into which slaves would put the cotton they had picked. Enough entrepreneurial Yankees set up shop in Augusta, Mobile, New Orleans, and other southern cities to elicit disparaging comments from local observers. Further cementing these interregional ties were marriages between the sons and daughters of

leading slaveholders and their New York counterparts in the business of brokering, insurance, and transporting of cotton in the Atlantic market.<sup>xii</sup>

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Slavery’s national reach was also cultural and social, especially in regard to prevailing ideas of racial difference. What may have linked the majority of Northerners and Southerners above all else was a belief in black inferiority and their willingness to use state power and extralegal violence to enforce it, especially in regard to free people of color. Northern municipalities excluded black children from new common schools, and urban mobs destroyed private institutions, lest education provide free people of color with a claim to citizenship. And to clarify the point, new franchise laws in New

York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island made it harder for black men to vote, just as those same laws opened the ballot box to almost every adult white man. States like Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa passed legislation that transformed most free people of color into illegal immigrants and restricted their rights to settle there. Even in places where there were virtually no black people, minstrel shows attracted large audiences, and publications written in fake black dialect flew off of booksellers’ shelves.<sup>xiii</sup> One important caveat is crucial here: Such evidence should not convey that there was no difference between nominally-free and slaveholding states. Runaway slaves generally headed north, whereas disfranchised free people of color rarely left Pennsylvania or New



Union Banknote, 1861. State of Maine banknote for two dollars issued by Sanford Bank, 1861. [Credit: The Granger Collection, New York ]

York to find better lives in Georgia or Arkansas. Nonetheless, the key point is that slavery structured enough of the political discourse, social practice, and cultural performance nationwide to link white Northerners and Southerners in a common commitment to white supremacy.

## Larger Frameworks

Because our textbooks—and sometimes even our semesters—use the Civil War as the end of one phase of American history and the start of a new one, it can be helpful to consider historical processes that neither began nor ended in the 1860s. Indeed, the continuities of nineteenth-century American history serve to open new perspectives on the war itself. When studying the history of American industrialization from Samuel Slater to Frederick Winslow Taylor, for example, it is hard to miss the robust development of Southern factories, railroads, technological innovation, and entrepreneurship in the decades preceding the war. A myopic focus on the Civil War obscures most of this history because it predictably highlights industrial weakness as a cause of Confederate defeat. But from a longer historical vantage, the mid-century South appears more typical than aberrational. Technologies like the telegraph integrated southern markets; Louisiana sugar plantations were as mechanized as many northern factories; agricultural improvers looked for efficiencies in plantation production with the zeal of northern actuaries; and public investment in transportation infrastructure gave the southern states an economic profile akin to industrializing European nations like France and Germany.<sup>xiv</sup> Only relative to the exceptional pattern of development in Britain and the North would the Confederacy ultimately appear to be industrially deficient.

Cultural history's standard chronological frame, the Victorian era, likewise pulls attention away from the Civil War itself, and in doing so, complicates facile assumptions of sectional difference. As a middle class organized itself around religiosity, volunteerism, self-control, and respectability in northern communities, a comparable cohort emerged in southern cities around the same values of restraint. The wives of southern doctors, lawyers, merchants, and shopkeepers engaged in the same patterns of church-based benevolence, and gained unusual autonomy in voluntary organizations that relieved widows, fought alcoholism, and promoted female education.<sup>xv</sup> Taking the 1830s through the 1890s as a whole, we see the outlines of a common national culture of manners, mourning, and consumerism, but also the contours of a gender regime with limited space for female citizenship. Victorian culture was deeply conflicted about the marketplace. Northern domesticity and southern paternalism both sought to enshrine familial relations as beyond the reach of coarse economic considerations. Neither succeeded, but a cultural ambivalence about market relations went hand-in-hand with the imperative to protect women (at least white middle-class women) from the corrupting influences of competition, whether in the realm of economic life or partisan politics. Here then is a broader context for understanding women's participation in the Civil War.

Other longer historical processes, like American territorial expansion or the rise of the nation-state, can further refine our understandings of the Civil War. Scholars of American empire, for example, increasingly contend that the nation's imperial history begins with the US-Mexico War of 1846 and not the Spanish-American War of 1898; if so, the Civil War may necessarily look different in its causes and consequences. Comparative historians are likely to situate the Civil War alongside German unification, the emergence of the Second British Empire, or the century-long dismantling of slave regimes throughout the Americas. Each of these comparisons has the potential to increase our appreciation of the Civil War's historical significance and distinctiveness. And whether we devote our attention to interrogating the sections, to recovering slavery's national history, or to situating the Civil War in broader contexts and longer chronological frameworks, we will recover the vast history hidden behind Lincoln's four words, "and the war came."

It seems worthwhile to close this essay by acknowledging the major challenge that comes from disaggregating the monolithic sections and recognizing the national reach of slavery: How do we explain the causes of the Civil War without a "clash of civilizations" story pitting the reform-minded North against the tradition-bound South? In many ways, the Civil War is easier to understand as an "inevitable" result of the divergence of two distinct and separate societies, one committed to industry and the other to slavery. New historical research has challenged this story significantly, but has not provided an equally compelling story for why the nation went to war in 1861. For some students and scholars, the process of complicating the coming of the Civil War is a disappointment because it robs us of a straightforward explanation for a monumental world-historical event. But for others—ideally, many readers of this essay—the lack of inevitability, the multiplicity of causes, and the uncertainties hereby introduced attest precisely to what makes history a vital and dynamic field of inquiry. The search for better answers is what sends every new generation of scholars into the archives to explore the past with fresh eyes. May your students be among them!

**“The search for better answers is what sends every new generation of scholars into the archives to explore the past with fresh eyes. May your students be among them!”**

- i Lacy Ford, "Reconfiguring the Old South: 'Solving' the Problem of Slavery, 1787-1838," *Journal of American History* 95 (June 2008): 95-122. For classroom resources to use in conjunction with this article, see [http://www.journalofamericanhistory.org/teaching/2008\\_06/](http://www.journalofamericanhistory.org/teaching/2008_06/)
- ii Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006).
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- v Edward E. Baptist, *Creating an Old South: Middle Florida's Plantation Frontier Before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002), 9.
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- xi Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery* (New York, 2001).
- xii Seth Rockman, "Slavery and Abolition along the Blackstone." In *A Landscape of Industry: An Industrial History of the Blackstone Valley. A Project of the Worcester Historical Museum and the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor* (Lebanon, N.H., 2009), 110-131.
- xiii Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998).
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# THE CIVIL WAR AS A SLAVES' WAR

By Susan Eva O'Donovan



*Civil War: Black Troops.* An unidentified Union army soldier with his wife. Carte-de-visite photograph, c. 1865.  
[Credit: The Granger Collection, New York ]

The blast of cannon that rattled windows on April 12, 1865, in Charleston, South Carolina, didn't come as much of a surprise to the nation's slaves. It was a moment they had been talking about and scheming about for generations. But it has been too easy for American historians to lose sight of slaves' involvement in the secession crisis and in the war that followed. Despite the encouragement of scholars like W. E. B. Du Bois, who in 1935 argued that the American Civil War can best be understood as a general labor strike, a moment when four million workers laid down their tools and quit their jobs as slaves, the story that has dominated our textbooks, movie theaters, and monuments for a century and a half has been one of free people and usually white people.<sup>i</sup> That is still a story with wide circulation. Yet in recent years, historians have been reconsidering the pantheon of Civil War actors. Influenced by a host of events, including the modern civil rights movement, scholars have moved slaves from the periphery and into the center of our Civil War narratives. It is a rethinking and repositioning that does more than simply add enslaved figures to an old story. By recognizing the enslaved as historical actors—as people who helped to change the course of human events—scholars are writing a wholly new story, one in which they have come to recognize slaves as revolutionary leaders in a revolutionary time.

**“Scholars have moved slaves from the periphery and into the center of our Civil War narratives.”**

It is a common practice to think of the enslaved as mute and inactive bystanders on history's stage. Perhaps that's true in an abstract sense, but it was never true in a concrete sense. And slaves were never less mute than in the years leading up to secession. Indeed, in a world defined by grossly inequitable balances of power, enslaved Americans knew their survival demanded that they remain always alert, always aware of their surroundings. Like

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many others, Henry “Box” Brown credited his successful escape from bondage on knowing something “of what was going on anywhere in the world.”<sup>ii</sup> The body of information slaves acquired was vast, and sometimes surprisingly esoteric. Charles Ball, for example, filed away knowledge about North Africa, its geography, and its people; it was information that came Ball's way during a chance conversation with an African-born slave who he later knew as “Mohamedan.”<sup>iii</sup> Others talked about their families and friends, shared tips on where to find medicinal plants or the location of a good fishing hole. William, the teamster who carried journalist Frederick Law Olmsted along one leg of a multi-state journey, pried from his passenger considerable information about New York, France, and Liberia.<sup>iv</sup>

As sectional tensions deepened in the late 1850s, political news and its corollary, freedom, came to dominate slaves' conversations. Like the vast majority of Americans, they could not tear their attention away from a deepening disunion crisis; and like their free counterparts, slaves engaged in lively debates about the Democrats, the Whigs, the Know Nothings, and what one former slave humorously called the "anti-Know Nothing" party.<sup>v</sup> In a number of Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Mississippi communities, slaves organized late-night rallies in support of 1856 Republican presidential candidate, John C. Fremont.<sup>vi</sup> In Virginia, slaves once owned by arch-secessionist Edmund Ruffin, talked among themselves about abolitionist John Brown's failed attempt at Harper's Ferry to provoke a servile rebellion.<sup>vii</sup> In west-central Georgia, Houston Hartsfield Holloway participated in what he called a reading club. But given their interest in secession and the rise of the Republican Party, Holloway could have called his group a political club.<sup>viii</sup>

Yet so long as slaveholders retained control over national as well as local and state governments, America's slaves judged the risks far too high to act too rashly on the information they were accumulating. Too much raw power was stacked against them. That power took the form of patrollers, courts, state and federal legislatures, and with Chief Justice Roger Taney's decision in the 1857 Dred Scott case, the highest court in the country. But circumstances quickly turned in slaves' favor when Abraham Lincoln's election forced slaveholders to cede a long-held national dominance to their political opponents. It was a change that terrified America's slaveholders for they understood that a Republican ascendancy would cost them access to many of the mechanisms that they had long used to restrain their slaves. The slaves knew this, too. But while they recognized in secession and war a long-awaited breach in slaveholders' defenses, they remained a careful and prudent people. Thus, what Du Bois called a general strike began on a tentative note.<sup>ix</sup>

A hint of what was to come appeared in the first weeks of the war as Union forces secured a foothold on the Virginia peninsula. Under the command of General Benjamin Butler, the army arrived at Fortress Monroe under orders to seize control of the Confederate coastline. The slaves they met had an entirely different aim in mind. Already feeling the loosening of bonds that had resulted from Confederate mobilization, slaves in the eastern portions of Virginia and North Carolina saw Union picket lines as a threshold to freedom. Nevertheless, unsure of the dangers they might encounter as they passed through Confederate lines, and unsure of the kind of greeting that awaited them behind Union lines, slaves approached the Yankees cautiously. First, only men made the trip. Once satisfied that freedom indeed beckoned from beyond the blue-suited picket lines, men, women, children – entire

families, according to one senior general—began to present themselves by the dozens and eventually hundreds to Lincoln’s soldiers.<sup>x</sup> Two years later, in May 1863, the Union officer responsible for supervising the black fugitives at Virginia’s Fortress Monroe, estimated that 10,000 former slaves had come under his control. “This is the rendezvous,” Captain C. B. Wilder wrote. “They come here from all about, from Richmond and 200 miles off in North Carolina.” Another fifty bondspeople had followed Stoneman’s Cavalry back from a raid in Yorktown. When Wilder asked one of the soldiers why the cavalry had allowed this to happen, the young man replied that they had no choice. “[The fugitives] followed us and we could not stop them.”<sup>xi</sup>

**“Yet despite the scale of wartime flight, it was not the result of a comprehensive or wide-spread plan. Slaves made their decisions to go as individuals, and often those decisions were shaped by the swiftly changing circumstances of war.”**

What happened at Fortress Monroe happened throughout the Union’s expanding theater of operations. Fugitives descended in droves on Union lines, wherever those lines happened to be. By 1864, an estimated 400,000 men, women, and children had liberated themselves by these means.<sup>xii</sup> The number climbed higher as Yankee soldiers fought their way into the Confederate interior, down the Mississippi River, out of Tennessee into Georgia, and by the last spring of the war, north through the Carolinas with Sherman’s devastating army. Yet despite the scale of wartime flight, it was not the result of a comprehensive or wide-spread plan. Slaves made their decisions to go as individuals, and often those decisions were shaped by the swiftly changing circumstances of war. In the fall of 1862, when Union forces reached the mouth of the Savannah River, Robert Blake knew that for him, slavery was over. “I left Savannah

on Sunday night Sept 21 /62 at 10 30 P.M., in Company with three others,” Blake recounted. “We came down Back River into the Main Channel & so on down to Fort Pulaski, which we reached on Monday mornng early.”<sup>xiii</sup>

The soaring number of black fugitives caught the North by surprise. Long steeped in its own racist traditions, few Northerners had anticipated the speed with which slaves took advantage of the opportunities war presented. Moreover, few Northerners outside of the most ardent abolitionists had viewed the war in its early days as a war against slavery. Lincoln spoke for the vast majority of his constituency when he denied in his first inaugural address any intent “to interfere with the institution of slavery.” Slaves disagreed. They knew that slavery was the fundamental issue, and as refugees presented themselves to Yankee picket lines, those who witnessed

**“Long steeped in its own racist traditions, few Northerners had anticipated the speed with which slaves took advantage of the opportunities war presented.”**



*Freed Slaves, 1862. A Union Soldier with the slaves of Confederate general Thomas Fenwick Drayton, on Drayton's plantation in Hilton Head, South Carolina, during the American Civil War. Photographed by Henry P. Moore, May 1862. [Credit: The Granger Collection, New York ]*

their arrival began to see that slaves and the labor power they represented were the lynchpins of rebel society. Everything the Confederacy stood for rested on the backs of slaves. Thus while many Northerners continued to question African American fitness to participate as full citizens, Union soldiers were soon welcoming black fugitives for their strategic value. Not only did slaves' flight from Confederate masters reduce the number of laborers available to Jefferson Davis and his military commanders, their employment as Union teamsters, cooks, roustabouts, and grave diggers, released more white soldiers for frontline duty. From the Yankee perspective, this was a win-win situation.

Fugitives contributed more than brute strength to Lincoln's cause. They also contributed valuable information about the Confederacy. Desperate for a commodity that was in short supply, especially in the first months of the war, Yankees greeted well-informed fugitives warmly. Within hours of his arrival at Georgia's Fort Pulaski, the aforementioned Robert Blake, passed along to his new allies a wealth of intelligence about Confederate operations in and around Savannah. There are between five and six thousand troops in the city itself, Blake told the soldiers. Thousands more were scattered around the city's perimeter, holed up behind earthworks and heavy artillery at

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Cranston's Bluff, Fort Lee, and Fort Boggs, and aboard the “floating batteries” that patrolled the river. Yet Blake knew that there was a way through the rebels' defensive maze. Speaking less as a spy and more as a strategist, he advised the Yankees to circle around to the south and approach Savannah via the Ogeechee River, Harbison's Plantation, and White Bluff Road. It wouldn't be easy, Blake warned, and the soldiers should expect to meet heavy guns and mortars at Harrison's Battery, but once past that last place, Union forces would have clear going the rest of the way into the city.<sup>xiv</sup>

The escalating flight of slaves toward Union lines forced Lincoln's hand. Although the president would have preferred to conduct the war without tampering with slavery, by acting on their own initiative, slaves were putting slavery squarely at

the center of Lincoln's agenda. Starting with the First Confiscation Act of August 1861, the president and his Congress gradually began to rethink the country's position on black freedom. The beginning was slow, as befitting the savvy politician we all know Lincoln was. But by the summer of 1862 and with the passage of the Second Confiscation Act, he and his government stood ready to eliminate slavery at least in the Confederate states. But as radical as those steps were, they fell short of what the enslaved wanted. Always several ideological and moral steps ahead of Lincoln, his cabinet, and most of the northern nation, black women and men demanded that slavery be eradicated entirely, including where it existed inside the Union. "[W]o be to Copperhood rabbels and to the Slaveholding rebel," snarled a former slave of the Union citizens who continued to hold black people in bondage. "[W]e dont expect to leave [you] there root near branch."<sup>xv</sup>

The fugitives who materialized every day along every inch of the Yankee lines constituted the most visible face of the slaves' rebellion. Hundreds of thousands more waged their battles far behind Confederate lines. Moreover, they fought without the protection of Union armies and Union guns. Indeed, the vast majority of the nation's four million slaves did not see their first Yankee until the closing days of the war, and some not until weeks after the

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Confederate surrender. This was especially true in cotton's strongholds in Alabama, west Georgia, east Mississippi, and parts of Texas, areas that went virtually untouched by the direct hand of a war that was laying waste to the Upper and seaboard South. Yet the absence of military might and the advantages that came with proximity to Lincoln's soldiers did little to discourage slavery's most ardent foes. They simply employed different tactics.

Many of those tactics were adapted from resistance techniques that slaves had been perfecting for generations. But sabotaging tools, slowing the line, laying out, feigning sick, and short-distance flight assumed greater meaning in the context of a war that was consuming Confederate men and materials at an awesome rate. With Union naval vessels effectively blockading the Atlantic and Gulf coastlines, and with Lincoln's armies amassed across the northern border of the rebel nation, the Confederacy relied entirely on its own resources for food, clothing, machinery, and munitions. Slaves had long produced these items, but as white men drained away to the front—initially as volunteers, then as conscripts—that work fell even more heavily on slaves. Slaves were, admitted a Georgia planter midway through the war, “the agracultural class of the Confederacy, upon whose order & continuance so much depends.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Yet as Confederates vanished into the smoke of battle, what had once been a brutally effective apparatus of power and control began to unravel. Those left behind by mobilization—generally the elderly and disabled, the young, and the female—were not strong enough, numerous enough, brave enough, or intimidating enough to extract the level of labor from slaves that wartime circumstances demanded. Absent too were the militias, patrollers, sheriffs, jailors, and jurists on whom slaveholders had long depended to help contain resentful and unruly slaves. These changes were felt almost immediately, and not just along the front lines. Though hundreds of miles away from the nearest Yankee outpost, the slaves on Will Neblett’s Texas plantation began to act (or not act, depending on one’s perspective) shortly after Neblett departed for Confederate service. Left home alone to do what historian Drew Faust has aptly called “a man’s business,” Will’s wife Lizzie encountered a wall of defiance. Unimpressed by a mistress who knew that she was out of her element, the slaves responsible for tending the crop stopped bothering to obey altogether. The slaves captured and sold their mistress’s chickens, equipment disappeared, and cotton production dropped by half.<sup>xvii</sup> Plantation discipline eroded as fast in other areas of the Confederacy. In the upcountry South Carolina community of Swift Creek, slaves appropriated every bit of moveable property, divesting their owners of what black labor had created.<sup>xviii</sup> In southwest Georgia, slaves so dramatically undermined the traditional social and productive order that they threatened to subvert accustomed power relations, a prospect that appalled their owner. Writing from a Virginia battlefield, Morgan Calloway scolded his wife to stop buying garden produce from their slaves. Every time you do so, he roared, you are “mak[ing] yourself the slave!”<sup>xix</sup>

Slaveholders did all they could to prevent a fatal slippage of power. After all, they had helped create the Confederacy for the express purpose of preserving slavery. That’s what the war was all about. To lose that struggle on the home front would render meaningless the death and horror of the battle front. With the stakes high, slaveholders scrambled to find an effective solution. Many relied on familiar routine, hoping that by keeping slaves busy making cotton and other staples, they might mask the absence of slavery’s chief male enforcers. When that didn’t work, they begged Confederate authorities to exempt overseers and other able-bodied white men from the draft. Others, believing that in “refugeeing” they could save slavery by putting more distance between slaves and Lincoln’s soldiers, gathered up their most valuable property and beat a hasty retreat into the Confederate interior. In neighborhoods characterized more by small slaveholdings than large and where refugeeing was not an option, slaveholders cut deals with workers in order to “conciliate & keep them from running away.”<sup>xx</sup> Eventually, some slaveholders simply quit trying to command obedience from their slaves and gave them up to Confederate authorities for safekeeping. Hired out to manufacture weapons, construct fortifications, and tend rebel sick, enslaved laborers came to represent

as many as half those employed in wartime industry. They were sent by masters like R. R. Shotwell of Mississippi, who admitted that he was “prompted by a desire to get out of the country my negro men (with a few women) who would not be controuled should Vicksburg fall .”<sup>xxi</sup>

None of these measures succeeded. Indeed, slaveholders’ efforts to hold onto their slaves backfired badly, costing them not only the last vestiges of control, but also the good will and support of many of their non-slaveholding neighbors. Efforts to restore plantation discipline by reviving staple production infuriated Confederate farmers, shopkeepers, and the poor—people on whom soaring wartime inflation and shortages fell most immediately and heavily. Those who grew cotton and not corn, they howled, posed a greater threat to the Confederacy than all of Lincoln’s armies together. Greedy and “unpatriotic,” was what one critic called his cotton-growing neighbors.<sup>xxii</sup> Smallholders, shopkeepers, and the poor were just as furious when in October 1862 the Confederate Congress gave in to slaveholders’ demands and “exempted from conscription one white man on each plantation with twenty or more slaves.”<sup>xxiii</sup> The popular slogan, “rich man’s war, poor man’s fight,” made manifest non-slaveholding Confederates’ outrage at what they perceived to be preferential legislation. Though hardly enemies of slavery themselves, they believed that instead of saving the Confederacy, exemption threatened its existence.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Good relations with their fellow citizens were not the only causality of planters’ wartime war against slaves. It seemed that the more fiercely slaveholders clung to their slaves, the less they had to hold onto. The enslaved, for example, did not take kindly to refugeeing. All too familiar with the social cost of forced migration, a process that invariably tore black families and friendships asunder, slaves balked when owners began to talk about wartime moves. Some simply dug in their heels and refused to leave. Others did all they could to interfere with their owners’ plans: failing to ready the horses and wagons, misplacing baggage and stores of food, or running away on moving day.<sup>xxv</sup> Slaves also found ways to convert wartime hire to their own advantage. Richard Lyon of Georgia believed that slaveholders ceded too much when they mixed together slaves who were strangers into high concentrations. Suppose a military request for slaves to work on the Savannah fortifications, was carried into effect, Lyon asked of a Confederate call for laborers. It would mean that slaves “from any part of the state ... [would] meet in Savannah” where they could then talk with one another about “their wants & their wishes & their situations.” Likening the assembly to “a regular Convention,” Lyon warned that plans would invariably “be concocted & agreed upon by

which the whole of the negroes in the state could act in concert for good or evil.” Conceding what was becoming abundantly clear, that slavery and war did not mix, Lyon saw in Mercer’s plan the end of all slaveholders held dear and predicted that giving slaves even more freedom to act would bring the Confederacy to its knees.<sup>xxvi</sup>

## Conclusion

With the war consuming men at an awful rate and volunteer enlistments dwindling just as fast, Abraham Lincoln opened the way for black enlistment in his January 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. By spring, recruitment was in full swing throughout the North and in most Union-occupied parts of the Confederacy. Before the end of the war 180,000 black men would fight, and many would die in the Union military. More than half of them (98,594) enlisted from the Confederate states.<sup>xxvii</sup> Bearing those brass buttons on their chests made famous by Frederick Douglass, uniformed and armed black men bore powerful witness to the magnitude of the revolution that had been unleashed by war. No longer simply a struggle to restore the Union to its antebellum dimensions, the conflict

**“No longer simply a struggle to restore the Union to its antebellum dimensions, the conflict had transformed into a war against slavery.”**

had transformed into a war against slavery. But to focus too closely on those black soldiers and their extraordinary accomplishments is to miss the full scope and scale of what Du Bois described long ago as a general strike. Indeed, to focus too closely on those brave black men is to misunderstand how it was that they came to be soldiers at all. Their elevation to the uniformed ranks was no historical accident.

The force that drove them forward did not originate in the hallowed halls of a federal Congress or in a president’s office. The force originated in slavery’s dank and miserable cabins, among a people who understood that the “war between the states” was at its most fundamental a war about slavery. What those four million unleashed was nothing short of revolutionary. And the rebels, in this case, wore chains.

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- ii Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), p. 2; Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*, 1st English ed. (Manchester, England, 1851), p. 7.
- iii Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, as a Slave Under Various Masters, and was One Year in the Navy with Commodore Barney, During the Late War* (New York, 1837), pp. 186-183.
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- v Biography of Ilef of H. H. Holloway, Houston Holloway Hartsfield Papers, 1894-1932, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
- vi William Webb, *The History of William Webb*, Composed by Himself (Detroit, Mich., Printer, 1873), p. 13.
- vii William Kauffman Scarborough, ed., *The Diary of Edmund Ruffin*, vol. 1: *Toward Independence: October, 1856 – April, 1861* (Baton Rouge, La., 1972), pp. 390-391.
- viii Biography of Ilef of H. H. Holloway.
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- x Excerpt of Benj. F. Butler to Lieutenant Genl. Scott, 27 May 1861, in *The Destruction of Slavery*, ed. Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), pp. 70-72.
- xi Excerpts from testimony of Capt. C. B. Wilder before the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, 9 May 1863, in *The Destruction of Slavery*, pp. 88-90.
- xii Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*, p. 61.
- xiii Statement of Robert Blake, [Sept. 1862], *The Destruction of Slavery*, pp. 132-133.
- xiv Statement of Robert Blake, [Sept. 1862], *The Destruction of Slavery*, pp. 132-133.
- xv Spotswood Rice to Kittey Diggs, [3 Sept. 1864], in *The Black Military Experience*, ed. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 690.
- xvi R. Q. Mallard et al. to Brigadier General Mercer, [1 Aug. 1862], in *The Destruction of Slavery*, pp. 795-798.
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- xviii Christopher Flinn et al. to Hon. Jas. A. Seddon, [Mar. 1861], in *The Destruction of Slavery*, pp. 806-807.
- xix Susan Eva O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), p. 97.
- xx W. Bosson to Maj. Genl. Thomas, 27 Jan. 1864, *WG:FL*, pp.435-438.
- xxi Rbt. R. Shotwell to Lieut. Coln. T. B. Lamar, 5 July 1863, in *The Destruction of Slavery*, pp. 800-802; Clarence L. Mohr, *On the Threshold of Freedom: Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia* (Athens, Ga., 1986), pp. 143-155.
- xxii Fred. Burtz to Gov. J. E. Brown, 29 Mar. 1862, Governor's Incoming Correspondence, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Ga.
- xxiii Berlin et al., ed., *The Destruction of Slavery*, p. 674.
- xxiv Quoted in David Williams, *Rich Man's War: Class, Caste, and Confederate Defeat in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley* (Athens, Ga., 1998), p. 132.
- xxv O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South*, p. 90.
- xxvi Richard F. Lyon to his Excellency Joseph E. Brown Governor of Geo., 9 Aug. 1862, Governor's Incoming Correspondence, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta.
- xxvii Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, ed., *Freedom's Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), pp. 16-17.

# WOMEN AND THE CIVIL WAR

By J. Matthew Gallman



*Soldiers' Aid Society, 1863. Members of the Soldiers' Aid Society, Springfield, Illinois, c. 1863, during the American Civil War. [Credit: The Granger Collection, New York ]*

For many women, the war years were a time of relatively modest personal adjustment to unfamiliar challenges. For others, the war represented a new opportunity to contribute to a national war effort. Thousands in the North and South experienced hardship, dislocation, and loss in the midst of this devastating conflict. For some segments of the population, particularly those enslaved African Americans who won freedom during or after the conflict, the war constituted a huge transformation in their lives. Other women, particularly in the North, navigated the war years without straying far from accepted gender norms and without rethinking those cultural conventions. For some, particularly white Southern men and women, the war produced a true “crisis in gender,” that challenged commonly accepted roles for men and women. This essay will consider how this diverse array of wartime women experienced the war years in a few broad categories of experience.

**“For some, particularly white Southern men and women, the war produced a true ‘crisis in gender,’ that challenged commonly accepted roles for men and women.”**

### **Family and Community**

For most wartime women the most substantial labors and their greatest patriotic sacrifice occurred within the home and community, not necessarily in the public arena. For many households the greatest drama occurred when men enlisted. Popular literature directed patriotic women to support men who contemplated signing up, but not all women happily embraced this sacrifice. Some mothers implored their young sons to stay home; some wives pressured husbands to choose between their obligations to family and their sense of duty. In the border states, these family dramas became more painful when sons chose to fight against their own family’s allegiances or when parents divided over the war. Still, most women in both the North and the South probably supported enlistment decisions as an act of patriotism, reserving the worst tears for when the regiments were safely out of sight.

**“But it is worth keeping in mind that the average age at enlistment was about 23 or 24 years old, whereas the average age of first marriage for men was a few years older.”**

These tears were not necessarily shed over husbands by wives. We tend to think of Civil War enlistments as breaking up married couples, leaving worried wives or grieving widows behind to deal with the war’s hardships. There is much truth to this narrative. Tens of thousands of marriages were disrupted or destroyed by the war’s carnage. But it is worth keeping in mind that the average age at enlistment was about 23 or 24 years old, whereas the average age of first marriage for men was a few years older. Moreover, men with families and dependent children had some clear disincentives to enlist, and in

most parts of the country, especially the North, such an excuse would have been met with approval. The draft created an added imposition on married men, but both the Union and the Confederacy had provisions for avoiding service by providing a substitute. The Union's enrollment acts also provided some protection for older men. In sum, the men who served in both Civil War armies were an extremely diverse lot, but most of them left behind mothers, siblings, and sweethearts, not wives and children.

Men may have left behind the women in their lives, but they often fought alongside familiar male faces. Unlike later American wars, both Union and Confederate soldiers commonly enlisted together in local regiments; and when casualties depleted their numbers, they returned home on furlough to fill out the ranks with new recruits. Thus, brothers, friends, and neighbors often marched into battle together. For the women and men at home, this meant that family members and friends became linked in their mind with particular companies or regiments. Women played ceremonial roles when the local regiment left for the front, sewing battle flags to be presented to the men as they departed.

Women who sent loved ones to the front tended to view the war's military events through multiple lenses. They paid some attention to the progress of the national military cause, but they were especially concerned with the fortunes of their local regiments, units that commonly included men from their homes and communities. Local newspapers followed the exploits of the community's soldiers in great detail, and commonly reprinted letters from

**“Women who sent loved ones to the front tended to view the war's military events through multiple lenses.”**

local soldiers. When black soldiers began serving in the United States Colored Troops, newspapers—including black newspapers but also some local community papers—took to publishing letters home from these new soldiers. Among the most famous of these soldier-correspondents was Captain James Henry Gooding, of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment,

United States Colored Troops, who sent letters home to the *New Bedford Mercury* until he was captured in 1864 at the Battle of Olustee.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, ladies' aid societies and other voluntary groups often targeted their activities towards the local regiments, maintaining yet another connection between home front and battlefield.

Like their communities at large, individual civilians relied on the mails to maintain contact with their men in the field. These letters sometimes became quasi-public documents, passed from hand to hand or read aloud at family gatherings. But where we can compare letters from individual soldiers to several family members, it is clear that the authors did their best to maintain distinct relationships with family members, friends, and lovers. Modern readers would be surprised at the tender intimacies occasionally shared by married couples in these wartime letters.

Meanwhile, sons often tried to protect their mothers from the true hardships and dangers they faced, even as they shared more of those details with fathers or brothers. Letters home also served an important and poignant role when soldiers died in hospitals or in the field. Final letters from comrades, officers, or nurses would describe deathbed scenes in loving detail, often recording final words or sending along a lock of hair or some other keepsake. In this manner people at home could share vicariously in their loved ones' last moments.

### **Politics and Participation**

Women in the North and South shared some fundamental political obstacles in common. None could vote, hold office, serve on juries, or, in a host of other ways, enter into public life as equals to men. But although laws limited their means of public expression, white women in both the Union and the Confederacy followed public events, framed opinions, engaged in dinnertime discussions, and took part in political discourse. The unusual woman spoke in public arenas on political issues, but many more made their opinions known through editorials, letters to the editor, and political fiction.

Northern women found it somewhat easier than their Confederate counterparts to give voice to their political opinions. There were more journals and publishing outlets for northern women, and cultural restraints on the entrance of middle class women into various public spaces were somewhat more relaxed in the North than in the South. Young Philadelphia orator Anna E. Dickinson became a national sensation when the Republican Party engaged her services as a paid stump speaker. On the other hand, when it came to vociferously supporting the war effort, northern women looked at their Rebel counterparts with some combination of jealousy and disgust. Certainly Confederate women did not defer when it came to declaring their patriotic passion.

Some of the most fascinating, and pedagogically valuable, episodes occurred in New Orleans. Occupied by Union troops since April 1862, the city at the mouth of the Mississippi became the scene of ongoing tensions between feisty Rebel women and disgruntled Union occupiers, who had hoped for a more charming assignment. These Rebel women refused to remain within the bounds of gender conventions, doing whatever they could to symbolically state their hostility to the Northern men in their midst. In response to these escalating

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gender conflicts, Union General Benjamin Butler issued his famous Order #10, threatening to have hostile New Orleans women arrested as “women of the town, plying their vocation.” This equation of Rebel women with prostitutes enraged Southerners, but Butler insisted that his order successfully calmed the waters.

Of course, neither the Union nor the Confederacy was ideologically monolithic. From the outset, civilians debated the war itself as well as the various measures adopted by each government to pursue the war effort. Women shared in these political debates, and, on various occasions, they joined in public conflicts and acts of civil disobedience. In the North, draft enrollers reported resistance—by women as well as men—when they tried to assemble lists for future conscription. In the violent draft riots in New York City, a handful of women appeared on the arrest lists, and newspaper accounts reported women cheering on the rioters. In the Confederacy, “soldiers’ wives” claiming a special status deserving of public support, flooded state governors’ offices with petitions demanding assistance. In North Carolina, Margaret Smith authored a petition on behalf of the “Suffering . . . Soldiers’ Families in Wayne County Dudley District” reminding the state government that “Your own governor of North Carolina has promised the soldiers that their families should share of the Last.” “We think it is high time,” she continued, “for us to get help in time of our need.”<sup>ii</sup> By the spring of 1863, these calls for assistance had turned violent.

While it is more difficult to assess how enslaved women responded to the political issues surrounding the war, we know that information flowed quickly through slave communities, particularly when there was word of an advancing army in the vicinity. And as white men left for the front, slave laborers sometimes had more room to engage in subtle acts of resistance. In June 1864, a worried Mrs. A. J. Dollar wrote to the Governor of Georgia, reporting that local blacks “in tend to do mischief” if order is not restored. A few months later Mrs. Mitchell Jones wrote to warn of a “deeply laid out plan of insurrection by the negroes.” Even if such actions were more about local conflicts as opposed to efforts to destabilize the Confederacy, it seems clear that some enslaved people, even while they remained enslaved, acted to undermine their masters. No doubt slave women took part in or aided these efforts.

Putting their politics into practice was not necessarily a novel experience for many women. Antebellum Americans, and especially northerners, had a long history of forming voluntary societies in response to social needs and reform agendas, ranging from poor relief, to temperance, to abolitionism. With the outbreak of war, local communities across the nation responded with dozens of voluntary societies that were largely staffed by women. These organizations addressed gaps in the military support structure while providing patriotic women opportunities to make their own

contributions to the war. Groups sewed bandages for the troops, visited hospitals, and raised money to send items—ranging from clothing to note paper to religious tracts—to the troops. In the North, where resources and leisure time were much more plentiful, two nation-wide umbrella agencies soon emerged, with local auxiliaries in most northern cities and towns. The United States Sanitary Commission, an outgrowth from the Women's

**“The United States Sanitary Commission, an outgrowth from the Women's Central Association of Relief, raised millions of dollars to send materials and medical assistance to soldiers in the field.”**

Central Association of Relief, raised millions of dollars to send materials and medical assistance to soldiers in the field. The somewhat smaller but similarly ambitious United States Christian Commission sent agents into the camps armed with religious tracts. Black northerners participated in some of these initiatives; they also lent

assistance to communities of ex-slaves—or contrabands—that cropped up on the Confederate periphery. In the South, women acted locally within the bounds of limited resources, but the Confederacy never developed nationwide organizations comparable to the Union's national commissions.

The time women devoted to volunteer organizations varied from a few hours to several days or more a week, and in most cases, the work they performed fell within the bounds of previously accepted gender roles. But the scale of these efforts and the public recognition that the female volunteers received helped to expand popular notions about the acceptable roles of women in public. Moreover, it seems likely that the experience of wartime activism left an important mark on the lives of the cohort of young women who threw themselves into war work as well as the younger girls in both regions who observed the roles that older women crafted for themselves.<sup>iii</sup>

Most female volunteers made their contributions on the home front, but as the war progressed, others began to drift toward the front lines. Service with the Sanitary Commission, for instance, carried many Northern women to distant military camps. Others, like Philadelphia's Mrs. John Harris, acted as emissaries between local Ladies' Aid Societies and regiments in the field. Many, including the aspiring novelist Louisa May Alcott, became volunteer nurses and worked in military hospitals far from home. Some of them, such as New Jersey's Cornelia Hancock and Scottish-born Confederate nurse Kate Cumming, volunteered their services to armies in the field, providing medical care along the front lines. In some cases, the wives of officers traveled with their husbands, setting up temporary households in winter camps. Once the Union began recruiting fugitive slaves as soldiers, it was not uncommon for their wives to follow: fleeing from their owners to take up residence on the periphery of military encampments.

**“Although numerically not very significant, a small number of celebrated women shattered conventional gender expectations by taking a more active part in hostilities.”**

Although numerically not very significant, a small number of celebrated women shattered conventional gender expectations by taking a more active part in hostilities. Some, such as Sarah Emma Edmonds of the 2nd Michigan Infantry Volunteers, put on uniforms and joined regiments of men in the field. Others fought as guerrillas or served as spies. Northern actress Pauline Cushman, Confederate secret agent Belle Boyd, and Washington socialite Rose O’Neal Greenhow gathered military intelligence while socializing with enemy officers. In Richmond, Elizabeth Van Lew secretly aided Union soldiers in Libby Prison while sending information to General Ulysses S. Grant in the field. Ex-slave

Harriet Tubman, best known for her efforts in leading other slaves to freedom, served as a guide and occasional spy for Union troops in South Carolina. In a few cases these cross-dressing soldiers and spies apparently responded to the lure of a steady income. Others acted at least partially to be with loved ones in uniform. But the historical record suggests that as many as several hundred of these gender-bending women were motivated primarily by patriotism and a desire to serve their respective nations.<sup>iv</sup>

**“In Richmond, Elizabeth Van Lew secretly aided Union soldiers in Libby Prison while sending information to General Ulysses S. Grant in the field.”**

### **Economics and Work**

Whereas the women who donned men’s uniforms or took to the streets as spies did so willingly, the material constraints of war left many other women no choice but to assume what were more generally considered men’s roles. This shift was felt the most acutely in the Confederate states. Faced with extreme shortages, the South turned earlier and more aggressively than the North to the seizure of goods and services to support the cause. Moreover, lacking the economic capital of its adversary, the Confederacy relied heavily on printed money, producing runaway inflation by the middle of the war. At the same time, the departure of white men for the front lines stripped farms and factories of their usual workforces. These economic changes landed heavily on the Confederacy’s women and children, a population that was soon forced to do what they and their historians considered “a man’s business.” Besides learning to make do with less, women took up hoes, plows, and, in the case of plantation mistresses, whips to a much greater extent than they had before the war. In their effort to make ends meet, some took paying jobs as factory hands and school teachers. In Richmond, Virginia, Confederate women found work in the Treasury and Ordnance departments; others earned wages in local munitions factories. For thousands of Confederate women, the war’s economic dislocations were exacerbated by the loss of homes and plantations. Pushed out of their homes

by invading armies, these refugees sought aid from family members and friends or fled to seemingly safe places. In May 1864 Judith McGuire and her family were forced to evacuate their Alexandria, Virginia, home in the face of Union occupation. It would not be until years after the war's end that the minister's wife and mother of two Confederate soldiers would settle once again into her own home.<sup>v</sup>

But not all of the South's women managed to survive in what was largely a male economy, and the most desperate began to push back, producing a political crisis in the midst of war. By 1863 the nation's most vulnerable free women were demanding governmental assistance. When their pleas went unanswered, they launched a series of bread riots—most famously in Richmond in April—and flooded the state and national governments with petitions, like the one in which Lucinda Chambers of Georgia explained how the war had left no man at home to help her support “Eight Children and one Old Ladey.” These petitions had their effect, forcing Confederate authorities to shift scarce resources back toward the home front.<sup>vi</sup>

**“But not all of the South's women managed to survive in what was largely a male economy, and the most desperate began to push back, producing a political crisis in the midst of war.”**

Northern women were in almost all senses better off materially than women in the Confederacy. The North faced inflation and occasional shortages, but not on their enemy's scale. In fact, with a booming war economy, jobs were plentiful and 800,000 new immigrants flocked to northern ports even as the war raged across the South. Still, many northern families had to adjust to the absence of husbands, brothers, and sons. Where the family patriarch was absent, women assumed responsibility for making family economic decisions. In farming districts, women and children stretched their labor to complete tasks that the missing men would ordinarily have done. Union women, like Confederate women, also took jobs in munitions factories, federal arsenals, and elsewhere, replacing able-bodied men away at war. In Washington, D.C., women went to work in the Treasury Department and the United States Mint as clerks. Many communities established funds to support the “families of volunteers,” measures largely aimed at promoting enlistment. And as was the case in the Confederacy, some of the most desperate women petitioned local and federal government officials for assistance, occasionally winning modest amounts of aid.<sup>vii</sup>

None of these were ideal situations. Women commonly earned less money than men in comparable positions. Wartime male workers in many sectors were well organized and routinely struck for higher wages and better conditions, but most female workers enjoyed no such protections.

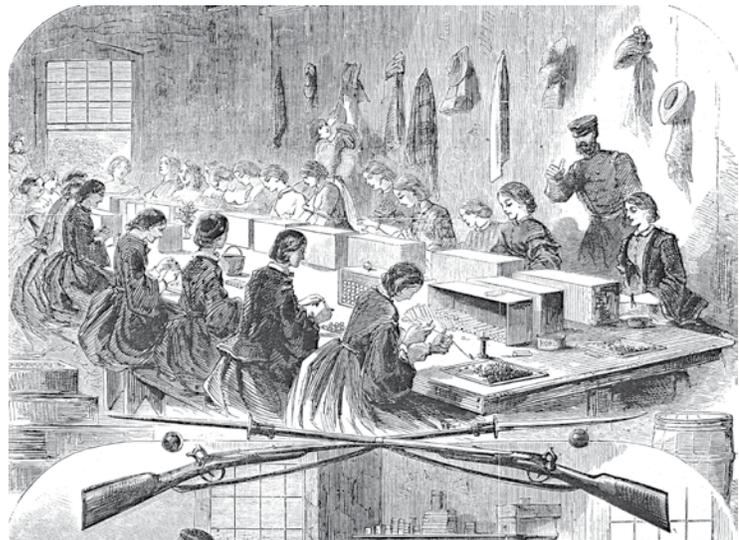
On both sides of the lines, women of all colors and classes went to work on or near the front lines. One of the most visible of these occupations was nursing. Long considered a role inappropriate for women, professional nursing had until the war been thought of as a man's job. But in 1861 Abraham Lincoln established the Army Nursing Corps, under the direction of Superintendent of Nursing Dorothea Dix. Particularly attentive to questions of propriety, Dix took pains to select older women whom she deemed more appropriate for working closely with injured and sick men. By the end of the war, roughly 3,200 women had served as federal nurses under Dix, leaving a postwar legacy of professionalized nursing. Meanwhile, thousands of other women in both the Union and the Confederacy worked independently as military nurses, in homefront hospitals, floating hospitals, and with the troops at the front. Denied access to nursing jobs, African American women found other forms of employment in Northern hospitals, where they commonly did work that was indistinguishable from the tasks taken on by white women. Other women—again, both black and white—earned a wartime living as cooks, laundresses, and laborers in and around military encampments. Still others followed the armies as independent sutlers, selling various foods and goods to soldiers eager for something other than the standard fare; and wherever those soldiers could be found, prostitution expanded and brothels flourished.<sup>viii</sup>

### Invaders

Where women labored and lived determined how directly they experienced the war. In the Northern states, women commonly saw the war as a distant abstraction, something they experienced largely through letters and newspaper accounts. But in a few famous cases, Confederate armies brought the trauma of war into Northerners' backyards and kitchens, most notably in Gettysburg and Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. On these occasions, white women did their best to protect property and perhaps hide Union soldiers, while free black women wisely fled, fully aware that any who fell into the hands of Rebel invaders risked being dragged into slavery.

For women in the border states, the war was a much more omnipresent force in their lives. In portions of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia, regiments from both the Union and the Confederacy repeatedly marched over the same terrain, forcing local residents to remain on constant guard for their lives and their property. In portions of Missouri, guerrilla warfare had a similar effect, as roving bands of partisans ravaged the landscape under the guise of patriotism. Women in these contested spaces did their best to avoid scrutiny, hoping simply to save their homes from arson and their caches of food and possessions from theft. But increasingly, simply lying low was not good enough. Troops, both Union and Confederate, replenished their rations with stolen cattle and crops, they burned fences as firewood, and their officers commandeered civilian homes as military headquarters. Battles turned croplands to wastelands, and everywhere Union soldiers went, slaves came out to greet them, stripping Confederate

communities of their primary workforce. In the early years of the war, soldiers generally treated civilians as noncombatants. Later, as the realities of “hard war” settled in, the line between soldier and civilian dimmed and then nearly disappeared altogether when Abraham Lincoln declared in April 1863 that citizens in enemy territory might well be “subjected to the hardships of war.” As the women who stood in the path of William Tecumseh Sherman’s army learned firsthand, it was a policy that brought the war even more directly into Confederate homes. But if Rebel women faced dangers at the hands of Union troops, it was the black women in their midst who were most likely to fall victim to sexual assault from unruly soldiers who strayed beyond the bounds of their commanders’ orders.<sup>ix</sup>



*Union Arsenal, 1861. Women workers filling cartridges at the U.S. Arsenal at Watertown, Massachusetts, during the American Civil War. Wood engraving, 1861, after Winslow Homer. [Credit: The Granger Collection, New York ]*

### Legacies?

The Civil War’s enduring impact on women and gender roles was every bit as diverse as the experiences of the four years of conflict. Certainly some of the most crucial effects of war, including emancipation, economic dislocation, and the loss of loved ones, crossed gender lines while still having an enormous impact on women. But in ways both large and small the war had indeed challenged the commonly understood gender roles that had shaped the antebellum lives of many women. Before the war’s end, tens of thousands had entered the public arena—as laborers, volunteers, and political actors—in wholly new ways. Many had engaged the government as petitioners, as protestors, and as spies. Countless women, both white and black, learned new ways to work and often under new conditions. Thousands, too, had seen their relationships with husbands, sons, fathers, and brothers transformed by years of separation, physical disabilities, or death. In the North, women who had engaged in wartime voluntarism used those acquired skills to remain engaged in reform and philanthropy. In the South, women threw themselves into public commemoration of the Lost Cause, crafting an expanded role in the process. With the massive postwar increase in federal pensions to veterans and their widows, more and more Americans entered into a new financial relationship with the federal government, and slave women, of course, slipped free at last from the chains of bondage.

IN GOD WE TRUST

Still, the path of history rarely moves in a single direction, and that is surely the case for the women who experienced four years of war. Scholars have noted that in many senses the postwar years were a time of retrenchment. Adjustments that had been forced upon society in a time of crisis did not necessarily yield enduring changes. The nation's economic, political, and legal institutions did not suddenly reflect recast gender roles, as many men and women seemed anxious to return to familiar gender roles in the postwar decades.

- i See James Henry Gooding, *On the altar of freedom: a black soldier's Civil War letters from the front*, edited by Virginia M. Adams (Boston, Mass., 1991).
- ii Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010), pp. 145-146.
- iii See, for instance, the correspondence from young girls addressed to wartime orator Anna Dickinson. J. Matthew Gallman, *America's Joan of Arc: The Life of Anna Elizabeth Dickinson* (New York, 2006).
- iv On women as soldiers see Lauren Cook and DeAnn Blanton, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War*, (Baton Rouge, La., 2002).
- v Judith W. McGuire, *Diary of a Southern Refugee during the War, by a Lady of Virginia* (Lincoln, Neb., 1995).
- vi Mrs. Lucinda Chambers to Mr. Joseph E. Brown, 10? May 1863, Governor's Incoming Correspondence, Georgia Department of Archives and History. On the bread riots, see McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, pp. 178-217.
- vii On working women in the North, see Judy Giesberg, *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009).
- viii On nursing see Jane Schulz, *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004.)
- ix See Jacqueline Glass Campbell, *When Sherman Marched North From the Sea: Resistance on the Confederate Home Front* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003).

# CIVIL WAR GUERRILLAS

By Daniel Sutherland



*Civil War: Soldiers*, 1864. Two soldiers (probably Confederate) smoking pipes at Brandy Station, Virginia. Photograph, 1864. [Credit: The Granger Collection, New York]

Most people think of the American Civil War as a clash of mighty armies. The so-called “guerrillas” of the war, we have been told, barely qualified as a sideshow. According to this line of reasoning, guerrillas did not influence how the war was fought or decide its outcome. However, historians have recently turned this old perception on its head by showing that it is impossible to understand the Civil War without appreciating the scope and impact of the guerrilla

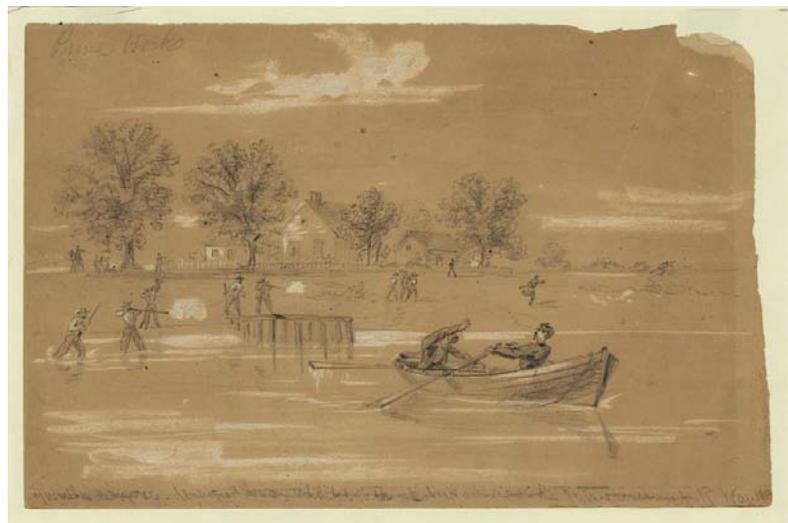
**“Historians have recently turned this old perception on its head by showing that it is impossible to understand the Civil War without appreciating the scope and impact of the guerrilla conflict...”**

conflict. They also have demonstrated the complexity of the guerrilla war, which had important social and political as well as military consequences. Indeed, guerrillas are now known to have played a decisive role in determining the nature of the war and how the struggle ended.<sup>i</sup>

To begin, we must distinguish between guerrilla warfare and the guerrilla war. The former defines mere military tactics; the latter encompasses the full reach and impact of guerrilla fighting in any civil war. Certainly many, and perhaps most, guerrillas fought as irregular soldiers against enemy armies, both Union and Confederate, but many others fought against their neighbors. This is

the dimension of the war most often misunderstood. We often speak of the Civil War as a “brother’s war,” which is taken to represent the worst of the national divide. Yet the war also divided whole communities, most notably in the South, with devoted Confederates on one side and equally devoted southern Unionists on the other.

Southerners who never saw or heard the sounds of battle knew all about the guerrilla war. It came to them in the form of community feuds that were every bit as fierce as conventional combat. It came in places where Confederates and southern Unionists squared off to see who would control their communities. The result was that southerners, even when free of military occupation, knew what it meant to confront war. Citizens caught in the snares of these community conflicts were beaten, executed, and driven from their homes



by rival bands of guerrillas. At the very least, they might see neighbors shot down or strung up, or have their own property stolen or destroyed. Here, for most southerners, was the real war. For them, the battles and campaigns, in a very genuine sense, represented an often distant sideshow.

It may even be said that the guerrilla conflict distorted the purpose of the larger war for many southerners. More than a struggle for independence or Union, it became principally a contest to maintain the security of homes and families. Local security trumped national goals and agendas. Rebels and Unionists alike came to see the war not so much as an epic clash between nations but as a showdown to determine who would control hundreds of individual communities and neighborhoods across the South.<sup>ii</sup>

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Further complicating matters, the guerrilla war bred cancerous mutations. By 1863, violent bands of deserters, draft dodgers, and genuine outlaws operated as guerrillas to prey on southern civilians. They sometimes claimed to be fighting for one side or the other, but that was all a dodge. Their principal interests were in evading capture, sustaining themselves, and collecting loot. Where these bands combined forces with armed Unionists and fugitive slaves, chaos ensued.<sup>iii</sup>

Although it was once assumed that most guerrillas fell into this category of cutthroats and ne'er-do-wells, it now seems clear that most irregulars, whether fighting in defense of their homes or the nation, differed little from the soldiers of the conventional armies. Granted, the conditions of the guerrilla war created a breeding ground for the restless and disaffected, for the paranoid and pathological, but such men alone could scarcely account for the large numbers who wished to join the irregular war. The most striking characteristic of many guerrillas was their respectable, middle-class status. Their bands included prosperous, educated, and respected leaders of the community. They may or may not have been slaveholders. They may or may not have been young men keen on adventure, but they generally were not poor people or stone-cold killers. The majority appeared to have fought for well-considered political reasons, and most of them believed in law and order. This might even be said of many “outlaw” bands. The army deserters and draft dodgers in these gangs were quite likely perfectly respectable citizens under normal circumstances. They had only turned against the Confederate government because they opposed the war or had grown weary of it. Criminal and guerrilla actions were their only defenses against provost marshals and must have seemed their best means of survival.<sup>iv</sup>

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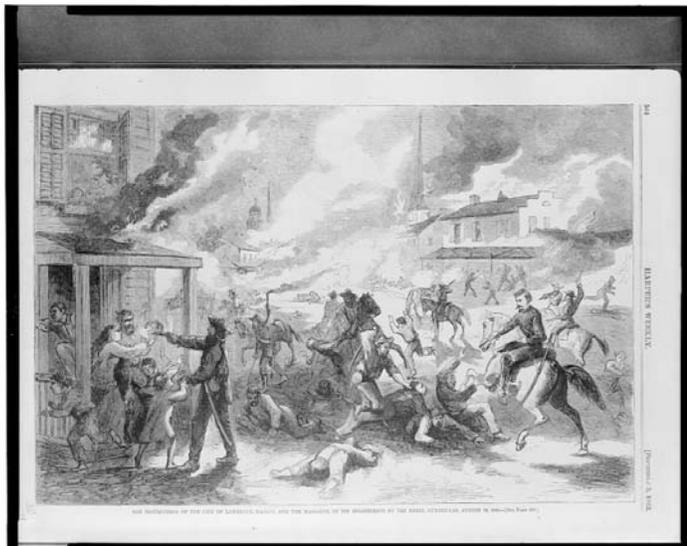
Kinship and family ties also figured in the organization of guerrilla bands, a factor that intensified already fierce neighborhood battles. “Kindred will be divided by the sword,” declared a Virginian. “Ancient friendships changed to bloody feuds.” The bitterness of such feuds only deepened as the war progressed. As new grievances exacerbated old ones, days of reckoning multiplied; men were quicker to settle accounts. “Just one thing after another seemed to fan the flame of our war spirit,’one man recalled.’ [P]eople had grudges against some neighbor, recalled another person. “So they got together to steal and destroy the property of absent soldiers and even to kill those whom they particularly hated.”<sup>v</sup>

Some women also participated in the guerrilla war, and they did so openly, unlike those women who disguised their sex in order to enlist as soldiers. A few of them joined when a husband or lover became a guerrilla. Sixteen-year-old Nancy Hart rode with the Moccasin Rangers in western Virginia because her boyfriend, twenty-four-year-old Perry Connolly, led the band. William Quantrill’s “wife,” Sarah “Kate” King, did the same thing. Some of them were genuinely deadly characters, known killers on “intimate terms with thieves and desperadoes.” Federal authorities arrested and punished hundreds of southern women during the war on a variety of charges related to the guerrilla war. Their most frequent crime, if not participating in murderous gangs, was “harboring and feeding” guerrillas.<sup>vi</sup>

Many women and girls, like the men and boys they served with or abetted, had romantic notions of what it meant to be a guerrilla. It seemed a game, and most women had slight conception of the dangers that awaited them.

Then, too, some of them believed their sex shielded them, that they would not be held accountable for their actions. That tactic sometimes worked. In Louisiana, a Connecticut infantryman reported in December 1862, “[T]he cavalry boys bring in [guerrillas] almost every day; the other day they brought in about 40 of them, one of them a woman dressed in men’s clothes. She was [paroled] promising not to [take up] arms against the United States.” Since paroles meant very little to most Confederates, this “she-rebel” may well have returned to the bush that same day.<sup>vii</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Federals raised a hue and cry against rebel guerrillas, men and women. They accused the Confederate government of waging an uncivilized war, and they insisted that it be abandoned. At once angered and embarrassed by the charges, rebel authorities responded by trying to temper the enthusiasm for guerrilla fighting. Toward the end



of 1861, President Jefferson Davis insisted publicly that the war be waged “on a scale of very different proportions” than the guerrilla conflict that had blossomed in the early months of combat. Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin stated flatly, “Guerrilla companies are not recognized as part of the military organization of the Confederate States.”<sup>viii</sup>

Yet by that time, things had gone too far. The guerrilla war was in full swing, and the government, whatever its desire, could not simply forbid it. The best the politicians could do was try to contain the guerrilla conflict, control guerrilla

**“The best the politicians could do was try to contain the guerrilla conflict, control guerrilla warriors, and counter Union charges of barbarity.”**

warriors, and counter Union charges of barbarity. With these goals in mind, the Confederate Congress passed the Partisan Ranger Act in April 1862. The irregulars of the American Revolution, including southern heroes Francis Marion and Thomas Sumter, had been called “partizans.” The Confederate government hoped that by borrowing their name, it could present a respectable front for its guerrilla bands, perhaps even establish a small, disciplined partisan corps.

Union leaders continued to protest this rebel mode of fighting, and not for philosophical, moral, or legal reasons alone. The shrillness of their protest betrayed the fact that rebel guerrillas and partisans severely hampered their war effort. Besides the obvious military problems caused by raids, ambushes, and sabotage, rebel irregulars posed multiple and quite unexpected political problems for the Lincoln government. In the loyal border states of Missouri, Kentucky, and West Virginia, Lincoln and state officials worried about how to protect the lives and maintain the allegiance of discouraged Unionists. War weariness caused disenchantment, so that the war on the home front became a test of wills, to see which side could maintain civilian loyalties.<sup>ix</sup>

Most importantly, as far as the eventual outcome of the war was concerned, the unanticipated ferocity of guerrilla resistance caused Lincoln and his generals to abandon their initial conciliatory policy toward rebel noncombatants. The U.S. government had entered the war hoping to create a groundswell of Unionist sentiment and



generate a political backlash against the rebel government by treating conquered communities kindly. U.S. officials wished to reassure southerners that the war would not touch them as long as they remained loyal to the Union. These hopes, however, were soon dashed by guerrilla resistance. It became impossible for Union soldiers to identify genuine “noncombatants” in a region where deadly bushwhackers masqueraded as peaceful farmers. By the end of

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1861, punitive measures against both guerrillas and their civilian supporters were in place in some occupied portions of the South. Captured guerrillas, rather than being paroled or sent to prison camps like “regular” Confederate soldiers, were either tried as criminals by military commissions or executed on the spot. Soldiers in the field preferred the latter solution.<sup>x</sup>

Equally heavy penalties fell on civilian communities thought to harbor guerrillas. When, in September 1862, guerrillas almost captured a packet boat on the Mississippi River near Randolph, Tennessee, Gen. William T. Sherman sent a regiment to “destroy” the town. He justified his action by saying, “It is no use tolerating such acts as firing on steamboats. Punishments must be speedy, sure, and exemplary.” When the rebels of western Tennessee ignored his warning, Sherman leveled other guerrilla haunts and expelled families from communities where Union shipping was endangered. Similarly, Adm. David D. Porter, who admired the anti-guerrilla policies of both Sherman and Ulysses S. Grant, arrested known guerrillas and their sympathizers, assessed collaborators at ten times the value of plundered or destroyed Union property, and burned whole communities. In reference to the last tactic, he told Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, “This is the only way of putting a stop to guerrilla warfare, and though the method is stringent, officers are instructed to put it down at all hazards.”<sup>xi</sup>

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As these responses suggest, rebel guerrillas, besides intimidating Unionist neighbors, could be extremely effective against the Union army and navy. In some places, they forced Union army commanders to alter their strategies and reallocate resources. This was one reason Union leaders railed so loudly against Confederate irregulars, and their protests are perhaps the best evidence of the nuisance guerrillas could make of themselves. Often, too, the federal army’s dual assignment of protecting Unionists and fighting Confederates came in conflict. As early as the summer of 1861, Gens. George B. McClellan and William S. Rosecrans, while commanding troops in western Virginia, assigned large numbers of men—one estimate is 4,800—to protect vulnerable railroads, bridges and tunnels, the Cheat River viaduct, and telegraph lines against guerrilla attacks. The additional guards did their job, but that left fewer soldiers to protect Unionist communities from guerrilla raids. Unionists complained that the army had abandoned them.<sup>xii</sup>

Everywhere, Union officers found their lines of supply and communication severed, their men “entirely powerless against the rapid movements of partisan cavalry,” the situation “unsettled” and “ominous.” General Sherman, a veteran guerrilla fighter by the time he began his Atlanta campaign, had to allocate thousands of troops to guard supply depots at Chattanooga and Nashville and protect his supply line. He feared no Confederate army behind him, for there was none, but unchecked cavalry raiders and guerrillas moved at will and might have isolated his army, especially given the unexpectedly stiff resistance to his advance by Gen. Joseph E. Johnston.<sup>xiii</sup>



Sherman’s concern extended all the way back to his days as a commander Kentucky. When Union commanders there and in Tennessee proved slow to eliminate the “anarchy” caused by local guerrillas, he dressed them down in no uncertain terms. Rebel guerrillas, Sherman reminded them, were “not soldiers but wild beasts unknown to the usages of war” and must be treated as such. Even so, Sherman ran a “gauntlet of guerrillas” during his march to Atlanta. In mid-July, when it looked as though his rear guard might falter, he increased the number of patrols and expeditions assigned to shield the railroad and protect telegraph lines. He ordered all “suspicious persons and families” imprisoned. “Show no mercy to guerrillas or persons threatening our roads or telegraph,” he warned. The army must not be “imperiled by any citizens.”<sup>xiv</sup>

This is not to say that Union opposition to rebel irregulars kept the Federals from using their own guerrillas. They never formed a partisan corps, but they encouraged independent bands of Unionist guerrillas in volatile regions, and they fielded companies and regiments of “guerrilla hunters” that were often as unrestrained as their prey. As the military governor of Tennessee, Andrew Johnson relied on David “Tinker Dave” Beaty to hound the likes of Champ Ferguson, one of the most notorious rebel guerrillas in Kentucky and Tennessee. Beaty organized his band in February 1862 as a response to the “conscripting, killing, and shooting at Union men” in his home county of Fentress. A Union officer said of him, “He is a whole souled fellow. If he had a Regiment, instead of a company, he would do wonders.” Ferguson claimed that Union guerrillas like Beaty were his only enemies. “I haven’t got no feeling agin these Yankee soldiers,” he maintained, “except that they are wrong, and oughtn’t to come down here and fight our people. I won’t tech them; but when I catches any one of them hounds I’ve got good cause to kill, I’m goin’ to kill em.”<sup>xv</sup>

**“More importantly, as guerrilla resistance seemed to spawn nothing but harsh retaliation and social anarchy, popular support for both guerrillas and the Confederacy rapidly dwindled.”**

Ultimately, the impact of the guerrilla war was twofold. First, rebel guerrilla resistance inadvertently inspired Union military policies and the grand strategy that ended the war. That strategy has been characterized in many ways. It has been called total war, absolute war, destructive war, hard war, relentless war, and savage war, but by whatever name, it represented a coordinated effort by Union armies in 1864-65 to exhaust Confederate will and push the rebels to the point of surrender. Carried out most successfully in Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia, it signaled the physical destruction of the South. Its object was to crush not only rebel armies, but also civilian morale and the economic resources of the Confederacy. Not coincidentally, this was precisely the strategy enacted in late 1861 to combat rebel guerrillas. When the initial, limited applications of that strategy failed, the Federals met increased resistance with tougher and tougher punishments. Both sides suffered from the escalating cycle of revenge and retaliation, but it finally wore out the Confederates.

The second result of the guerrilla war grew naturally from the first. Confederate guerrillas had proved to be a double-edged sword insofar as they both aided and injured their cause. Despite their ability to annoy the Union army and strike fear into Unionist civilians, they grew increasingly independent and ungovernable, very nearly waging their own war. The government found itself publicly defending both independent bands and partisan rangers while privately lamenting the excesses of their guerrilla fighters. By late 1864, the Confederate government tried to cut its losses by eliminating even the partisan rangers, save for a few companies in Virginia.

Some historians think that Confederate president Jefferson Davis wanted to reverse this policy once Richmond fell. Desperate to continue fighting, say these scholars, Davis hoped to inspire widespread guerrilla resistance. This interpretation misreads the situation. The president's entire cabinet opposed any such operation, and his chief military advisor, Robert E. Lee, had a long-standing distrust of guerrillas. More importantly, as guerrilla resistance seemed to spawn nothing but harsh retaliation and social anarchy, popular support for both guerrillas and the Confederacy rapidly dwindled. People who had entered the war as loyal Confederates came to doubt that their government could protect them. Surrounded by violence, all semblance of order and civilization seemed to have collapsed. People who had looked to local guerrillas for protection blamed them for much of the ruin, but they also cursed the government. It was the government's inability to shield them that had led many communities to rely on guerrillas in the first place. As people saw that their leaders could not control the upheaval, they lost their stomach for war. In that sense, the Confederacy collapsed from within as much as it was crushed from without, and the guerrilla war played no small role in the outcome.<sup>xvi</sup>

- i Bruce Catton first lamented the treatment of the guerrilla conflict as a “side issue” in the Civil War in the forward to Virgil Carrington Jones, *Gray Ghosts and Rebel Raiders: The Daring Exploits of the Confederate Guerrillas* (New York, 1956). vii. Most of the following essay draws on the findings of Daniel E. Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009). Also useful in the context of this essay is Daniel E. Sutherland, “Sideshow No Longer: A Historiographical Review of the Guerrilla War,” *Civil War History*, 46 (March 2000), 5-23.
- ii This argument runs counter to the conclusions of scholars who stress a strong national identity among Confederates. See, for example, Anna Sarah Rubin, *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861-1868* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2005).
- iii For the variety and categories of guerrillas, see Daniel E. Sutherland, “Guerrilla Warfare, Democracy, and the Fate of the Confederacy,” *Journal of Southern History*, 68 (May 2002), 259-92.
- iv Good examples of this argument may be found in Kenneth W. Noe, “Who Were the Bushwhackers?: Age, Class, Kin, and Western Virginia’s Confederate Guerrillas, 1861-1862,” *Civil War History*, 49 (March 2003), 5-31; and Mark W. Geiger, *Financial Fraud and Guerrilla Violence in Missouri’s Civil War, 1861-65* (New Haven, Conn., 2010).
- v Quoted are Jonathan M. Berkey, “Fighting the Devil with Fire: David Hunter Strother’s Private Civil War,” in John C. Inscoe and Robert C. Kenzer, eds., *Enemies of the Country: New Perspectives on Unionists in the Civil War South* (Athens, Ga., 2001), 21-23; E. A. Dunbar to R. E. Chase, June 11, 1923, Jasper Sutherland to E. J. Sutherland, October 15, 1921 (Box 22), Elihu J. Sutherland Papers, Wyllie Library, University of Virginia’s College at Wise. A good example is Ralph Mann, “Ezekiel Counts’s Sand Lick Company: Civil War and Localism in the Mountain South,” in Kenneth W. Noe and Shannon H. Wilson, eds., *The Civil War in Appalachia: Collected Essays* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1997), 78-103.
- vi H. E. Matheny, “Wood County, West Virginia”, in *Civil War Times* (Parkersburg, W.Va.: Joseph E. Shakach, Jr., 1987), 47-52, 232-40; Edward E. Leslie, *The Devil Knows How to Ride: The True Story of William Clarke Quantrill and His Confederate Raiders* (New York, 1996), 186-90.
- vii Chris Pena, ed., “F. S. Twitchell’s Letter Describing a Female Guerrilla,” *Louisiana History*, 39 (Winter 1998), 89.
- viii Lynda L. Crist et al., ed., *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, 11 vols. (Baton Rouge, La., 1971, VII:434; U. S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1880-1901), ser.4, vol.1, p.1008.
- ix For the many problems caused by rebel guerrillas in the Upper South, see Robert R. Mackey, *The Uncivil War: Irregular Warfare in the Upper South, 1861-1865* (Norman, Okla., 2004), and for the most volatile state, see Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri during the American Civil War* (New York, 1989).
- x Clay Mountcastle, *Punitive War: Confederate Guerrillas and Union Reprisals* (Lawrence, Kans., 2009).
- xi Brooks D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin, eds., *Sherman’s Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999), 305-10; Benjamin Franklin Cooling, *Fort Donelson’s Legacy: War and Society in Kentucky and Tennessee, 1862-1863* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1997), 115-16; David O. Demuth, “The Burning of Hopefield,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 36 (Summer 1977), 123-29; U.S. Navy Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 35 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1894-1927), ser.1, vol.23, pp.451-52.
- xii Kenneth W. Noe, “Exterminating Savages: The Union Army and Mountain Guerrillas in Southwestern West Virginia, 1861-1862,” in Noe and Wilson, eds., *Civil War in Appalachia*, 104-30.
- xiii Cooling, *Fort Donelson’s Legacy*, 85-90; Henrietta Fitzhugh Barr Journal, May 20, July 23-24, 1862, West Virginia Regional History Collection, West Virginia University Libraries; Richard M. McMurry, *Atlanta 1864: Last Chance for the Confederacy* (Lincoln, Neb., 2000), 26-30.
- xiv *War of the Rebellion*, ser.1, vol.38 pt.5, pp.140-41, vol.39, pt.2, p.135-36.
- xv Troy D. Smith, “Don’t You Beg, and Don’t You Dodge,” *Civil War Times Illustrated*, 40 (December 2001), 44; Leroy P. Graf et al., eds., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, 16 vols. (Knoxville, Tenn., 1967-2000), VII:262; James A. Ramage, *Rebel Raider: The Life of General John Hunt Morgan* (Lexington, Ky., 1986), 101. See also Gary D. Norris, *Tinker Dave Beatty’s Independent Scouts* (Albany, N.Y., 2001), and Thomas D. Mays, *Cumberland Blood: Champ Ferguson’s Civil War* (Carbondale, Ill., 2008).
- xvi William B. Feis, “Jefferson Davis and the ‘Guerrilla Option’: A Reexamination,” in Mark A. Grimsley and Brooke D. Simpson, eds., *The Collapse of the Confederacy* (Lincoln, Neb., 2001), 104-28; Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict*, 267-71.

# THE NORTH'S WAR: RACE AND RACISM IN LINCOLN'S UNION

By Leslie Schwalm



The Civil War was not only a military conflict, and it was not only waged on battlefields. It was also a time of significant public, and sometimes violent, contention among the people of the northern states over the meaning of race in their home communities and in American society. As Union and Confederate soldiers went to war, northern civilians battled over what race would mean to the ordering of American society. In their homes, workplaces, the streets, and halls of government, northerners clashed over the uncertain future of the privileges and status long associated with whiteness and the disadvantages legally and customarily imposed on black men and women. It was an uncertainty that fueled the war's gradual challenge to slavery and growing demands by northern blacks for full and equal citizenship.

Although northern regional identity and politics on the eve of the war portrayed slavery as a political and moral conundrum that the South had imposed on the nation, slavery had been a national institution. Northern slavery is often wrongly dismissed as an artifact of the colonial era, since most northern states initiated gradual emancipation soon after independence. But gradual emancipation meant that some African Americans in the North remained enslaved well into the antebellum era, and former slaves were forced into a semi-free status that no northern whites were made to endure. In some states, like Illinois, free blacks could still be sold at public auction for violating state laws, as late as 1853. Moreover, the end of slavery did not mean the end of racism. Slavery's abolition often cost free black Northerners many of the rights they had previously enjoyed, including in some states, the right to vote. Others found themselves pushed into the lowest ranks of the Northern working class, edged out of more lucrative or stable work by white Americans and new immigrants. Enmeshed in a system of race relations that elaborated on white superiority and black inferiority, exclusion, segregation, restricted mobility, and limited opportunity came to define black Northerners' lives long before the outbreak of Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

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What can be described as a public politics of race did not go unchallenged. In the years leading up to the war, black women and men along with a small minority of white advocates for racial equality, worked tirelessly to combat discriminatory ideas, practices, and laws. Some advocated black colonization or emigration outside the nation, fearing that white supremacy left no opening for black political, social, or civic equality in the U.S. Others sought ways to alleviate injustices at home, like interfering with enforcement of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law and using the courts to challenge discrimination. But the combined impact of the 1857 Dred Scott Supreme Court decision (which declared that African Americans had no rights that white men were bound to respect) and the failed attempt to inspire a slave

uprising during the 1859 raid on the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, made it clear that more than public opinion was at stake. Even before the shots were fired at Ft. Sumter, northern whites and African Americans understood that the entwined issues of race and slavery were not likely to be resolved without the loss of life.

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The outbreak of war would increase the volume and extent of northern debates about the place of African Americans in the nation. Public conversations, opinions, and conflicts over the future status of people of African descent, and by extension, the relative status of whites, became an integral part of home front observations on the war. These debates would influence political campaigns, enter commentary about wartime labor shortages, and shape discussions about where the bulk of the nation’s black population ought to live. Racialist ideas and debates would even inspire new consumer products, from stationary depicting caricatures of newly-freed, northbound slaves to children’s games that included “contraband” figures.<sup>ii</sup>

The vehemence of these exchanges revealed the centrality of race to the everyday politics of life in the North. Although African Americans made up only 2 percent of the non-southern population on the eve of the war, it was not demography that determined the impact of the war on northern ideas about race. Instead, it was a centuries-old debate about the relationship between race, freedom, citizenship, and privilege that gave force to the conflicts that erupted in the North during the war. This would be especially true as southern slavery weakened and northern whites were forced to confront a future in which slavery no longer determined the status of most people of African descent and the majority of black Americans would no longer be confined to the southern states. Thus, in the view of many Yankees, emancipation posed no small threat to their material, social, legal, and political rights—privileges that in both North and South had long been associated with whiteness.

Most white northerners did not enter into the war with freedom for slaves on their minds. Even those who had voted with the Republican Party were far more invested in preserving the Union and in protecting free labor than they were in abolition. Believing that people of African descent were by nature a degraded and inferior race, many also feared the consequences of liberating four million African Americans from the controlling force of slavery. In 1862, Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the bestselling novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, tried to explain northern white fears about emancipation: “Many well-meaning people can form no idea of immediate emancipation but one full of dangers and horrors. They imagine the blacks free from every restraint of law, roaming abroad a terror and a nuisance to

the land.” Harper’s Weekly, a popular and widely circulated magazine, condemned those fears as unchristian and petty, but acknowledged their pervasiveness: Americans North and South were unwilling to “tolerate negroes, except as slaves. We can’t bear them. We don’t want them in our houses. We won’t meet them in public assemblages, or concede to them any rights whatsoever, except the bare right of living and working for us, sometimes for wages, generally without.”<sup>iii</sup>

Black Northerners wanted much more, and as the Union army gradually began to extend protection and then freedom to runaway slaves who approached their southern encampments, black Northerners continued to press for full freedom and, with it, full political and civic equality. In Iowa, Illinois, California, and Ohio, advocates of racial justice successfully removed or significantly weakened discriminatory laws. Challenges to segregation in border-South and northern cities had gained some traction, as well. In January 1863, black Northerners celebrated the Emancipation Proclamation, which not only promised liberation to slaves but opened up the possibility that black men could serve their country as soldiers. From her vantage point at the nation’s capital, where fugitive slaves came in by the thousands to escape slavery, former slave Harriet Jacobs saw the hand of “a just God. . .settling the account.”<sup>iv</sup> Still, African Americans knew that much more would be needed to end what one black journalist described as a “mockery of freedom.”<sup>v</sup> State laws, public support, and generations of practice fortified legal and customary discrimination against easy incursion; yet to many activists the war seemed poised to change this status quo. Women like Mrs. Ellen Anderson, refused to yield to segregation any longer. Only days after learning her husband had died serving his country in uniform, Anderson took her seat in one of New York City’s white streetcars. By the summer of 1865, she had won her lawsuit against the

streetcar company that violently ejected her and opened the city’s streetcars to all black riders.<sup>vi</sup>



Unwilling to await the war’s outcome, northern black men and women redoubled their struggles against racial injustice. While advocating for slavery’s destruction, they also demonstrated a desire and willingness to serve the Union cause, both as soldiers and as champions of equality. As the war progressed, national debates about the “place” or social position of African Americans became increasingly tied to anxieties about “location” or where African Americans ought to labor and

live. These debates began early in the war as black fugitives in ever growing numbers made their way to Union lines. But the Emancipation Proclamation—which Abraham Lincoln announced in September 1862 and issued on January 1, 1863—brought with it new fears that the North would be inundated with hundreds of thousands of former slaves. In assemblies that ranged from local protest meetings to larger mass gatherings and violent mobs, anxious white Northerners from Washington, D.C. to Canada West, expressed their reservations about federal policy, and Democratic newspapers urged their readers to block “every attempt to crowd out white men to give place to negroes.”<sup>vii</sup> Critics feared emancipation would unravel a long-standing race hierarchy, and they were so vocal in their opposition that Lincoln and a Republican-dominated Congress attempted to head off trouble by introducing colonization proposals into nearly every discussion of black freedom.<sup>viii</sup>

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Northerners’ concerns about an influx of black Southerners were not entirely unfounded. Though the number of wartime migrants is difficult to determine, recent research suggests that at least 100,000 former slaves made their way west to Kansas; up the Mississippi River to Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota; across the Ohio River; and up the Atlantic coast. Some were pushed north by Union commanders confronted with large, strategically inconvenient, and often unwanted populations of fugitive slaves. Relocation was for these officers, a practical solution to a growing humanitarian crisis. Other former slaves made their own way north. Some made arrangements with soldiers to work for their families, while others traveled alone, hoping to escape the violence of slavery and the chaos of war. Before war’s end, former slaves had resettled in towns such as Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, and Worcester, Massachusetts.<sup>ix</sup>

Wherever they arrived, newly emancipated slaves became lightning rods for white opposition. Without question, their presence raised questions among white Northerners about black citizenship. Their arrival also generated debate about the proper reach and function of the federal government and about the meaning of masculinity in households seemingly turned upside down by the war. Whites protested the threat of a “black tide heading up the Mississippi” and portrayed African Americans “coming in vast herds to the fair prairies of the North West,” caricatures that dehumanized black migrants by likening them to the landscape or the cattle and hogs that roamed over it. White Midwesterners also expressed concern that the black newcomers would rearrange local economies and gender hierarchies. According to one rumor, jobs left vacant by departing soldiers would be “filled by lazy, shiftless, negroes.” It was a prospect that filled many whites with fear. For according to another set of predictions, not only would the

replacement of white workers by blacks threaten the purity of soldiers' dependents—white women—it could only end in violence. Once “conscious of the outrage inflicted upon him,” stormed one doomsayer, he would “rise up and throw off the incubus . . .”<sup>x</sup>

Northern newspapers fanned the flames of racial antagonism. When Mississippi River boatmen went on strike and former slaves were recruited to work in their absence, one Midwestern newspaper complained, “Here you have it, laboring men of the North....the inevitable nigger is to crowd you out; your families are to suffer because you cannot compete with contraband labor.” A Wisconsin paper asserted that there was “an irrepressible conflict” between free white labor and free black labor, and one or the other must triumph, consequently white laborers may as well

**“‘A horde of black paupers will take possession of your homes,’ warned a Davenport newspaper.”**

prepare to take a back seat.”<sup>xi</sup> Keosauqua, a Iowa newspaper editor suggested that, in light of Republican betrayal of the white population, “White men and women in want of employment, are advised to black themselves with burnt cork, rubbed with lard, and make immediate application to the Government...Ebony is all the go now, and who would not prefer a black skin to an empty stomach?” Another Iowa paper predicted that when white workers returned from the war, they would find themselves “compelled to labor alongside the brawny African, and have him for an associate and companion.” Other warnings were issued, “‘A horde of black paupers will take possession of your homes,’ warned a Davenport newspaper.”<sup>xii</sup> Ironically, the majority of migrating former slaves were not men, but women and children.

Exaggerations about the scale and consequences of black migration, along with the racial anxieties these distortions evinced, fueled a vigorous defense of white supremacy. Anxious white citizens petitioned state legislatures to enact measures that would prevent the in-migration of black Southerners.<sup>xiii</sup> Only days after the Emancipation Proclamation, whites in Des Moines, Iowa, staged a “citizens’ arrest” of Archie Webb, a wartime refugee from slavery. The seizure was an attempt to revive enforcement of Iowa’s law against black migration to the state. Black freedom, argued those white Iowans, had its limits, even in the North.<sup>xiv</sup> Some of those concerns were assuaged by the hope that emancipation would end black migration northward and by Lincoln’s continued proposals for the colonization of freed slaves outside the nation. Indeed, Lincoln sent hundreds of African Americans to the Caribbean four months after issuing the proclamation.<sup>xv</sup> But racial antipathy continued to surge, and sometimes took violent forms. White mobs attacked black workers who had been hired to replace whites in Chicago; Evansville, Indiana; Cincinnati; Cleveland; Brooklyn; Buffalo, and Boston. Mobs attacked black communities in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Detroit and New

Jersey. On farms and in small towns across the Midwest, whites threatened and attacked neighbors who dared to employ recent arrivals from southern slavery. The intensity of racial violence and protest against the relocation of former slaves northward was so violent, it led the War Department to suspend temporarily its efforts to find former slaves new homes in the north.<sup>xvi</sup>

Still, not every Northern white greeted black freedom and migrating ex-slaves with hostility. In Johnson County, Iowa, black relocation was encouraged by a local white officer even as his neighbors organized a protest meeting against the threat they claimed black migrants posed to the “dignity of white labor.”<sup>xvii</sup> In parts of the Midwest, white

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women were so eager for black servants that at least one observer described the labor demand as “wench fever.” Indeed, when shiploads of former slaves disembarked at the Mississippi River towns in the upper Midwest, they often were outnumbered by the potential employers who awaited their arrival. And, although in 1862 the abolitionist governor of Massachusetts John A. Andrews had rejected a proposal

to relocate former slaves to his state, some state residents proved willing to aid in the relocation and resettlement of former slaves to their hometowns. Yet in Massachusetts, as in other destinations where former slaves arrived during the war, the welcome extended by even the most sympathetic whites was laden with racist assumptions that these African Americans, just out of slavery, were degraded both intellectually and morally and that they would require the superior assistance of whites in their struggle to elevate themselves. As historian Janette Greenwood has observed, these assumptions perpetuated two of the key components of northern white racial ideologies: the denial of the full humanity of African Americans and the affirmation of white superiority.<sup>xviii</sup>

One of the reasons white Northerners worried so intensely about slaves and slavery was because soldiers wrote home about them. Passed among friends and families and printed in hometown newspapers, soldiers’ letters home talked about the contributions fugitive slaves made to the war effort. Soldiers for whom slavery had long been an abstraction began to recognize and write about the humanity of the enslaved and about their determination to gain freedom for

**“In their letters, soldiers and their commanders acknowledged the military importance of denying the Confederacy its slave labor force and began to advocate freedom as a matter of strategy. Yet many white Union soldiers clung to their disdain for people of African descent...”**

themselves and their families. In their letters, soldiers and their commanders acknowledged the military importance of denying the Confederacy its slave labor force and began to advocate freedom as a matter of strategy.<sup>xix</sup> Yet many white Union soldiers clung to their disdain for people of African descent and wrote of the slaves they encountered in degrading and caricatured language. These words and perceptions found their way into hometown newspapers and hometown discussions about the nation's racial future.<sup>xx</sup> The fierce antipathy expressed by many white soldiers shocked white abolitionists who, like Julia Wilbur, witnessed such attitudes first hand. Writing from a contraband camp where she worked on behalf of the fugitive slaves, Wilbur noted that "Many of the soldiers are angry because they have been so long without pay, & they lay everything to the nigger, he has caused the war, & now he is freed, & government is helping them & the soldiers are mad, & they take every opportunity to insult & abuse the negroes."<sup>xxi</sup>

The Emancipation Proclamation signaled an irreversible change in the nation's policy on race and slavery. In addition to promising the eventual liberation of slaves throughout the Confederacy, it opened the door to the enlistment of black men in the Union armed forces. The financial and human cost of war made possible in 1863 what few white northerners would have tolerated even a year earlier. For the most part, white Union soldiers also accepted emancipation as a necessary and strategic move. Freeing the slaves would erode the Confederacy's ability to wage war, and the enlistment of black soldiers would help replenish badly depleted Yankee ranks.

Yet however as much as the white soldiers and the Northerners understood the logic of the federal policy, they continued to insist that freedom did not mean social or political equality. These reservations exploded into public view the summer of 1863, after the federal government instituted a military draft. Outraged by a policy that, among other things, allowed wealthier men to exempt themselves from military service by paying a \$300 fee, angry New Yorkers rose up in a weeklong assault. Mobs of the city's white men, women, and children attacked symbols of the Republican Party, including the draft office, the state armory, and the office of the New York Tribune. They then turned on the city's black residents. Furious that poorer white men would be forced to risk their lives to liberate a people toward whom they felt extremely ambivalent, mobs launched what has been described as a carnival of violence. They beat, tortured, raped, and lynched black New Yorkers. They destroyed black homes and property and leveled the Colored Orphan Asylum. So extreme was the rage of these white mobs, that African Americans fled the city by the thousands.<sup>xxii</sup> It would take Union soldiers fresh from their victory at Gettysburg to finally suppress the violence.

Black enlistment gained ground as a result of the New York City draft riots. It was not lost on Congress, for example, that filling depleted Union ranks with black men would reduce the need for a much hated conscription. As black men demonstrated their willingness and ability to fight (something skeptics had questioned), Congress stepped up recruitment efforts and even made it permissible for northern states to meet federal quotas with black Southerners.

Military service also appealed to black Northerners. In the wake of the draft riots, they seized upon military service as a path to full citizenship and responded enthusiastically to the formation of black regiments. Though black soldiers initially suffered glaring inequalities in pay and duties and would suffer death and disease at a much higher rate than white soldiers, African Americans volunteered in far greater proportions than did white men. By war's end, more than 32,000 or 71 percent of eligible Northern black men had served in the Union army. Another 19,000 had joined the Navy.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Yet no matter how hard black soldiers drilled, no matter how fiercely they engaged with the enemy, they could never fully erase white Northerners' fears. Thus while many white soldiers began to change their minds about black men once they saw them in action, conceding as one Iowan did that he no longer objected "to them doing the fighting," others found it difficult to abandon long-held racial prejudices.<sup>xxiv</sup> "[L]et the nigger shovel and dig, and I will fight, but do not make him an equal with me," another white Northerner spelled out in a letter. "I can't stand that."<sup>xxv</sup> As was the case with many more white Northerners, he found it impossible to invert old ideas and to view African Americans anew as fully vested citizens.

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Although the valiant service of black soldiers challenged preconceptions and even changed some minds, most white Northerners were reluctant to reverse decades of racial practice. Nothing revealed this more clearly than the debates that preceded the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment.<sup>xxvi</sup> While plainly aimed at the South and its secessionist slaveholders, many white Northerners feared that the amendment might do too much. State legislatures and the popular press, questioned the advisability of such a radical measure. Freedom, insisted several northern legislators and governors, must not be equated with citizenship or with social, civil, or political equality.<sup>xxvii</sup> Others conceded that black freedom, and perhaps even enfranchisement in the South, might be necessary to fully suppress former Confederates and to maintain Republican control over the federal government. Some also thought that citizenship was a just reward for military service. But few white Northerners were ready to extend to every black American the rights routinely enjoyed by white people. They were especially reluctant to let black men go to the polls. At war's end, black men could vote in only five northern states (Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont and Rhode Island), and New York restricted black suffrage to those who owned substantial amounts of property. Between 1865 and 1866, nine northern states rejected referenda which would have enfranchised black men. In 1867, Ohio, Minnesota, and Kansas refused to open the polls to black men; in 1868, voters in Michigan and New York reached the same conclusion.<sup>xxviii</sup> Indeed, in yet another of the many ironies that distinguished the Civil War era, black southerners exercised more political rights than their northern counterparts between 1867 and the ratification of the Fifteenth

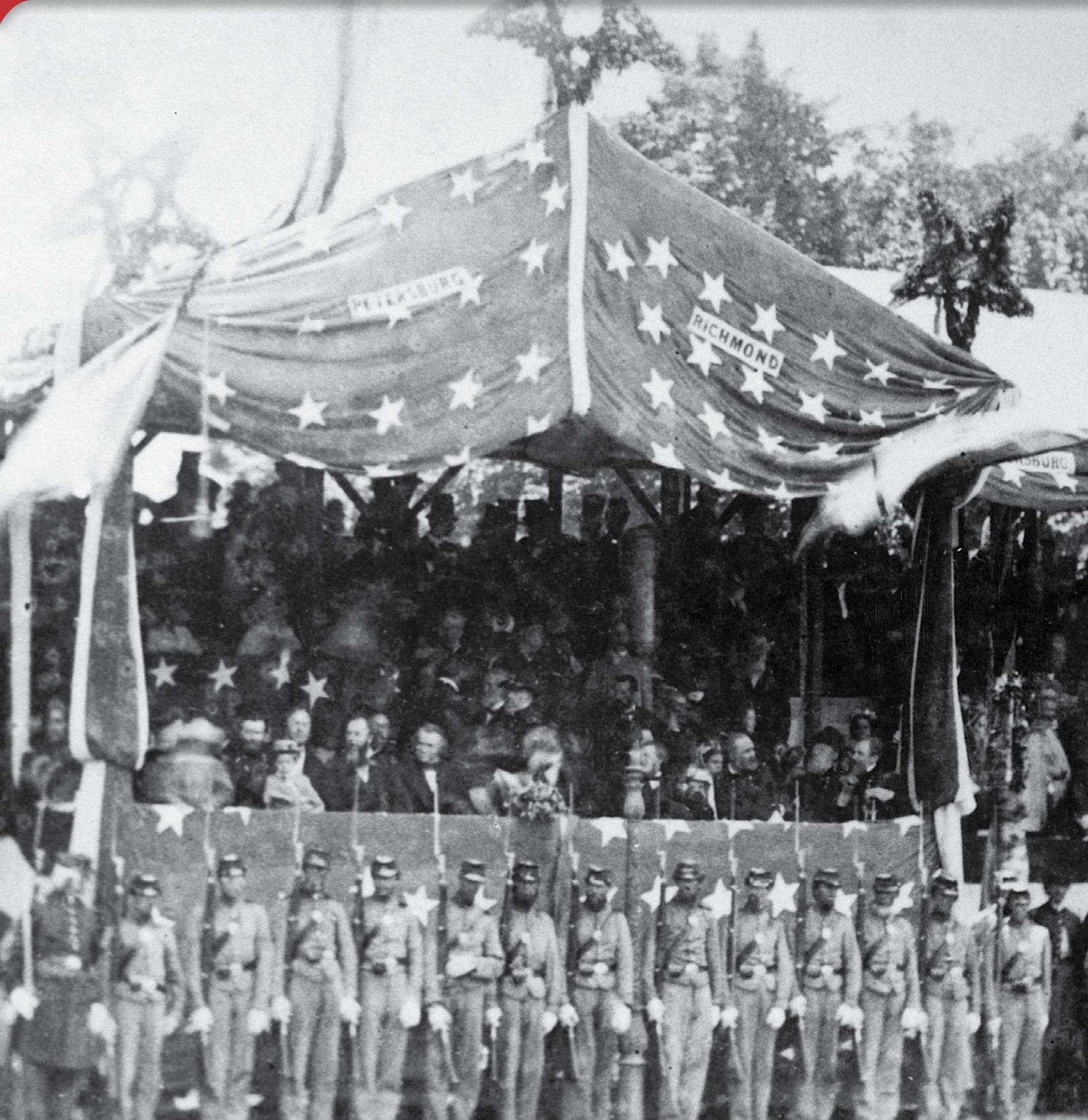
Amendment in 1870. It was an injustice black Northerners loudly decried. Without the rights of citizenship, they declared, “our well-earned freedom is but a shadow.”<sup>xxix</sup>

The Civil War opened, but did not close, a northern debate about race and about the place of African Americans in American society. Too much remained at stake, including white Northerners’ sense of themselves, their history, and their future. Racial ideologies and proscriptions would continue to circumscribe black lives and opportunities into the next century, sparking new contests and prolonging the old. Race would likewise provide the mechanism for knitting the nation back together, but on terms that favored white people, not black. Nevertheless, the Civil War forced the discussion into the open and showed that race was a national—not a regional or solely Southern—problem.

- i Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998); Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1973); Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York, 1998).
- ii "The Contraband Gymnast," manufactured by Milton Bradley & Co., was advertised in the *Scientific American*, December 10, 1864.
- ii New York Independent, August 21, 1862;; *Harper's Weekly*, June 28, 1862.
- iii Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York, 2004), 162.
- iii Quote by Robert Hamilton, from his paper, the *Weekly Anglo-African*, September 26, 1863; on Robert Hamilton, see C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers, Volume V: The United States, 1859-1865* (Chapel Hill, 1992), 27-29.
- iv Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York, 2004), 162.
- v Ibid.
- vi *The Muscatine Courier* (Iowa), October 4, 1862.
- vii On the Lincoln Administration's Advocacy for Colonization, see David W. Blight, *Fredrick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge, La., 1989), 134-47.
- viii Leslie Ann Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009); Janette Thomas Greenwood, *First Fruits of Freedom: The Migration of Former Slaves and Their Search for Equality in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1862-1900* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009).
- ix Ibid
- x Ibid
- xi Thomas Greenwood, *First Fruits of Freedom: The Migration of Former Slaves and Their Search* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009). See, for example, demands in Ohio and Illinois for the passage of laws as reported in *The Liberator*, February 14, 1862.
- xii Quoted in *Fairfield Ledger* (Iowa), December 12, 1862; *Davenport Daily Democrat and News*, October 4, 1862.
- xiii Ibid
- xiv Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, 102-04.
- xv Paul D. Escott, "What Shall We Do With the Negro?" *Lincoln, White Racism, and Civil War America* (Charlottesville, Va., 2009), chapter eight
- xvi Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, chapter 3; Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York, 1998), 290-92; V. Jacqué Voegeli, *Free but Not Equal* (Chicago, 1967), 34-35.
- xvii *Iowa City Republican*, April 1 and April 8, 1863.
- xviii Greenwood, *First Fruits of Freedom*.
- xix See Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Ser. I, Vol. I: The Destruction of Slavery* (New York, 1985), 257 (for an incident in Tennessee involving the army of the Ohio), and 352-354 (for an incident in Maryland, involving a Massachusetts regiment, and the response of Massachusetts governor John A. Andrews), and 433-34 (when Iowa Governor Samuel Kirkwood requested Secretary of War to reassign state troops outside of Missouri rather than have them forced to return fugitive slaves to their masters). See also reports in *The Liberator*, on May 2, 1862, August 15, 1862, and August 7, 1863; and Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, 46-63, 92-93.
- xx See, for example, the *Manitowoc Pilot* (Wisconsin), February 13, 1863; the *St. Paul Pioneer* (Minnesota), December 21, 1862; the *Oskaloosa Weekly Times* (Iowa), March 5, 1863; and the *Constitution* (Keokuk, Iowa), February 12, 1863 and October 8, 1863.
- xxi Jean Fagan Yellin, ed., *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2008), Vol. 2, 432 (quote); see Nina Silber and Mary Beth Sievens, eds., *Yankee Correspondence: Civil War Letters between New England Soldiers and the Home Front* (Charlottesville, Va., 1996), 61-64, 74, 85, 87, 95; Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York, 2007), 50; David Williams, *A People's History of the Civil War: Struggles for Freedom* (New York, 2005), 345-46; V. Jacqué Voegeli, *Free But Not Equal: The Midwest and the Negro During the Civil War* (Chicago, 1967); Alice Fahs, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North & South, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2001), 152-55; Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi* (Bloomington, Ind., 1999), 23-24, 39-40; Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (Baton Rouge, La., 1990), chapter 2; Phillip Shaw Paludan, *A People's Contest: The Union and the Civil War, 1861-1865* (New York, 1988), chapter 9.
- xxii Hundreds were murdered, thousands injured, and the city's black population would drop to its lowest since 1820. Barnet Schecter, *The Devil's Own Work: The Civil War Draft Riots and the Fight to Reconstruct America* (New York, 2005), 252; Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War* (New York, 1990), and Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago, 2003).
- xxiii Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Ser. II, The Black Military Experience* (Cambridge, 1982), 12; National Park Service Civil War Soldiers and Sailors and Sailors System, [http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/sailors\\_index.html](http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/sailors_index.html), accessed 1/6/2011.
- xxiv Jeff Hoge to Tillie Wide, January 4, 1863, Box 2: Corr. MsC 419 Wise-Clark Family Papers Special Collections, University of Iowa.
- xxv Edward E. Davis to [illeg.], April 16, 1863, in Edward E. Davis Collection, MsL D2615c, Special Collections, University of Iowa.
- xxvi Blight, *Fredrick Douglass' Civil War*, 183-84.
- xxvii Michael Vorenberg, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (New York, 2001).
- xxviii Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, 176-77.
- xxix From the 1865 convention of Iowa's recently-discharged black soldiers, quoted in Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, 180.

# THE CIVIL WAR AS A GOOD WAR: FINDING MEANING IN THE WAR SINCE APPOMATTOX

By W. Fitzhugh Brundage



Civil War War Review, 1865. At the Grand Review of the armies of Generals Grant and Sherman at Washington, D.C., 23 May 1865, the troops marched past the stand occupied by President Andrew Johnson, his cabinet, and the two generals. [Credit: The Granger Collection, New York ]

Warfare on the scale and of the savagery of the Civil War compelled generations of Americans to reflect on its meaning. Americans have labored to make sense of a war that called into question their nation's founding principles and very existence. During the century and a half since Appomattox, Americans have debated God's role in the conflict, the consequences of the war for the American state, and the extent to which the war was waged against slavery. With few exceptions and whatever the differences in their race or sectional allegiance, commentators agreed that the Civil War was the pivotal event in the nation's development. But perhaps the most striking feature of the debates over the meaning of the Civil War is that even during the past half century, when many Americans became disillusioned by American military intervention in Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, few commentators have concluded that it was a senseless and indefensible conflict.<sup>1</sup> Americans refuse to entertain the possibility that the war was a tragedy that served no larger purpose.

The specific meanings attached to the Civil War, of course, varied according to place, time, and perspective. The scale of southern defeat demanded reflection; the defeat of the slaveholder's republic was complete and absolute. Its president, Jefferson Davis, was captured as he fled headlong in disguise; its armies were in complete disarray; and virtually all of its major cities were either occupied by Union forces or had been reduced to ruins. There were other, less obvious scars of the war with which former Confederates had to come to terms. To observe that the Civil War was, by orders of magnitude, the bloodiest war in American history does not do justice to its toll of human wreckage. There are estimates or, better said, guesses that the Confederate dead numbered between 250,000 and 300,000. Confederate forces during the war totaled between 750,000 and 1.25 million. Thus, between one in five and one in three Confederate soldiers died during the war. White southerners who had embraced the Confederate cause necessarily interpreted the war's outcome in a very different light from their victorious opponents.

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To begin to grasp the scale of the war's slaughter and the paradox of how that slaughter was viewed, it is worthwhile to linger a moment longer on the Confederate casualties. Considerably more than half of the Confederate dead had been ravaged by disease, sometimes as a consequence of battle wounds but often entirely unrelated to combat. And then there were the wounded. The number of injured Confederate soldiers who survived the war may have equaled the number of Confederate dead. Taken together, the odds of a soldier in Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia surviving the war without serious injury and without having been captured was probably about one in five.

And even Confederate veterans who remained bodily intact bore psychological scars of war for the rest of their lives. Mid-nineteenth-century Americans had neither the vocabulary nor the science to diagnose Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Nevertheless, there is compelling evidence of the lingering effects of psychological trauma on veterans on both sides. A recent study of the mental health history of more than 15,000 Union veterans revealed that 44 percent of the veterans suffered from some form of mental illness. Because there are no comparable postwar medical records for Confederate veterans, no analogous study for Confederate soldiers is possible. Yet given the hardship that Confederate soldiers endured, there is every reason to assume that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder was as common among Confederate as Union veterans.<sup>ii</sup> In light of the carnage that white southerners brought upon themselves when they launched the Civil War, we might have imagined that they would subsequently have spoken of the war with regret, like Europeans who look upon World War One as a tragedy, the source of subsequent troubles, and a war without justification or point. White southerners instead took pride at the sacrifice of generation that risked everything in a futile and catastrophically bloody cause.

Supporters of the Confederacy, unlike their former foes, could not rely on the satisfaction of victory to assuage their losses and salve their scars. Moreover, they had to square their defeat with their conviction that God dictated the course of human events toward a specific end. The crushing defeat of the failed southern nation might have prompted whites to abandon their conviction that God favored them. They, after all, had insisted that God had a transcendent purpose for the Confederacy and this belief actually intensified as the war progressed.<sup>iii</sup> Yet rather than

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interpret Appomattox as evidence of God’s wrath, many former Confederates concluded that they were latter day Israelites of the Old Testament and that God had used the ungodly to chasten his chosen people. For many white Southerners, the trials they suffered during the war and its aftermath were reminders of the wickedness that always threatened God’s chosen.

Postwar white southern evangelicalism, in short, was an essential element of the white southern interpretation of the war. Presbyterian theologian Robert Lewis Dabney, for example, gave voice to an influential theological defense of the white South, ranging from antebellum institutions and slavery to secession and white supremacy. According to Dabney, the antebellum South was becoming both more evangelical and more prosperous. At the same time, the institution of slavery flourished. Therefore, the argument followed, God ordained slavery in the South to reward Christian slaveholders and to evangelize their slaves. God clearly had providential purposes for

slavery; he would not have allowed it to thrive if it were not a part of his plan. The attack on slavery had been contrary to God’s will. In the wake of defeat and abolition, Dabney reassured white southerners that they had no reason to question the moral foundations of their region or their cause. Nor should they doubt the benevolence of Providence or their special destiny in God’s plans. As another white southern cleric put it in 1869, the war had been a “necessary disciplinary ordeal, chosen by God” to prepare white southern Christians “for their high and holy mission, as custodians of unadulterated evangelicalism and as his honored instruments for the development of a pure Christian civilization throughout this continent and throughout Christendom.”<sup>iv</sup> The enduring innovation of southern white clerics was to sacralize the war and the Confederate warriors who fought in it. Not only did this claim of the war’s divine purpose provide a bulwark against suggestions that white southerners had been treasonous or immoral, but it also removed from individual white southerners responsibility for the defeat of the southern republic.

Recently freed black Protestants likewise saw the hand of divine providence at work in the Civil War. Long before hostilities commenced, African Americans had sought to make sense of their place in Christian history. They discerned in the Old Testament much more than just a parable of God’s deliverance; it was a testament to God’s special providence for them and, along with Revelations, undergirded their hopes for eventual justice. Given their anticipated deliverance, black Americans predictably interpreted the Civil War and emancipation as God’s judgment and their vindication. Antebellum black Christians had already warned whites that they stood in peril of divine judgment. Now emancipation was a redemptive act through which God wrought national regeneration. Divine will, announced one black cleric, operated through human agency during the Civil War. “God in answer to our fathers’ and mothers’ prayers seemed to have whispered to Lincoln in Psalms telling him that the Negro’s emancipation was the country’s only redemption.”<sup>v</sup> By so explaining the mystery of slavery, these and other black orators insisted that the divine providence of history had worked—and might work again in the future—to elevate

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African peoples. Emancipation at once made a mockery of proslavery claims that God had endorsed slavery and anticipated some profound, imminent, and millennial transformation in the status of black people. The future of Christian civilization in general and the black race in particular would be played out on the North American continent where black women and men already discerned ample evidence of their race’s rapid ascent of the ladder of civilization.

White northern Protestants had a different understanding of God’s plan in the Civil War. They interpreted the Union victory as the triumph of a favored but sinful nation rather than as a divine dispensation to enslaved African Americans. Most antebellum white northern theologians were racists who achieved, at best, theological incoherence on the issue of slavery. Consequently, they were no more likely than their white southern brethren to believe that God had anointed African Americans for a special destiny. Indeed, the proliferation of independent black denominations composed of former slaves was a blow to the ambitions and expectations of northern white Christians. By the 1880s more and more white northern Protestants pledged to overlook divisive sectional religious traditions and embraced a renewed national religious identity, one now informed by a powerful strain of American, as opposed to strictly sectional, triumphalism. Justified as the prerequisite for white Protestants to fulfill their special role in Christendom, this religious reconciliation circumscribed discussions of the war’s meaning. The war, they agreed, had been a test of faith and national resolve, but it was not punishment for either slavery or white racial arrogance.<sup>vi</sup>

This providential interpretation of the war, which was most pronounced during the late nineteenth century, meshed easily with the ascendant nationalism of the era. Many commentators who shied away from theological explanations of the war’s significance nevertheless saw the conflict as the welcome resolution of sectional disputes that had riven the nation for at least a half century. War settled what neither politics nor debate had resolved. The union was indivisible, secession illegal, slavery abolished, and the supremacy of the federal government established. With Union victory, the reunited nation was poised to achieve its proper place as a burgeoning economic colossus and a paragon of democracy. From this perspective, the war was a purifying ordeal that purged the nation of discordant and destructive institutions and ideas. Woodrow Wilson, in his scholarly writing before becoming President, was

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a forceful proponent of this interpretation. Despite his white southern roots, Wilson described the Civil War as “the supreme and final struggle” between the “forces of disintegration” and the “forces of health, of union and amalgamation.” The war, he contended, was the product of conflict over constitutional interpretation. The tragedy of the war was that “in it sentiment met sentiment, conviction

conviction.” Because “The South fought for a principle, as the North did” both combatants were endowed with principle and honor. Rather than assigning blame for the war, Wilson urged his compatriots to view the conflict as a tragic but glorious chapter in the nation’s history. The true patriot, Wilson concluded, must “inspire sympathy and confidence between all parts of the country” and “instill into the minds of the people those principles which will lead them to act in their already truly grand capacity of a united brotherhood.”<sup>vii</sup>

A corollary of this nationalist interpretation of the Civil War was the contention that emancipation was a wartime exigency rather than a bold national commitment to racial equality. Slavery, for Wilson and his ilk, had been lamentable not because it was an injustice to blacks but because it had divided the nation and stifled economic innovation. Rather than a war of emancipation, the Civil War had been fought to restore the Union, as Abraham Lincoln himself famously explained to Horace Greeley. Lincoln moved with caution when he promised emancipation to the slaves in the Confederacy and he subsequently never pledged the nation to extend full equality to the freed people.<sup>viii</sup> Consequently, the measure of the success of the war was the extent to which the nation had overcome sectionalism, not the status of African Americans or the achievement of racial equality.

In various permutations, this nationalist interpretation of the war prevailed as conventional wisdom until the 1960s. Generations of Americans grew up learning that the Civil War had been a “Brothers’ War” fought by valiant and earnest whites divided by principle. Here is the Civil War of textbooks, Hollywood movies, and popular fiction. Here is the Civil War as both romantic and redemptive. But not all Americans accepted this understanding of the war’s significance. Some white southerners nursed a dissident sectional interpretation of the war while African Americans continued to insist that racism and injustice were at the heart of the nation’s trauma.

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For strident white southern devotees of states’ rights and some with libertarian leanings, the war marked the death of liberty and the advent of Federal tyranny. Rather than marking the end of distracting sectional divisions, Union victory, according to this view, had allowed the federal government to assume power constitutionally awarded to the states. The war’s outcome, rather than the conflict itself, was what these defenders of states’ rights objected to. In the decades following the Civil War, and accelerating in the early twentieth century, white southern conservatives saw mounting evidence of the erosion of local prerogatives, ranging from economic and racial concerns to traditional morality. This counter-interpretation of the Civil War surfaced in widely divergent contexts. Opponents of child labor laws in the South might rail against the threat that centralized regulatory power, dating from the Civil War, posed to economic freedom. Artists disillusioned with modernity reviled the dehumanizing effects of the industrial civilization that emerged triumphant during the war. White supremacists denounced proposed federal anti-lynching legislation as the inevitable extension of illegitimate national police powers initiated during the Civil War. By way of contrast, the Confederacy purportedly represented the last bulwark against overweening centralized tyranny.

Edmund Wilson, the preeminent literary critic of his generation, demonstrated that the lament about the Civil War as an engine of tyranny appealed beyond the borders of Dixie. In *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the Civil War*, published in 1962, Wilson presented a compendium of authors who had addressed the Civil War. His most striking claim, at least to present-day ears, was that the Civil War was a war of Northern aggression, a power grab that had been cloaked in meaningless, “rabble-rousing,” and “pseudo-moral” anti-slavery slogans. Wilson openly admired Alexander Stephens, a tireless defender of secession and the Vice President of the Confederacy. Stephens’s notorious benediction of slavery as the cornerstone of the Confederacy in the early days of the slaveholders’ republic elicited not even a wince from Wilson. Instead, Wilson dwelt on what he interpreted as Stephens’ prescient fears of a Leviathan state. Wilson even proposed that, in an age of apparent bureaucratic tyranny, “the cause of the South is the cause of us all.”<sup>x</sup> Wilson’s deep respect for Stephens and the Confederate cause mitigated his condemnation of the war and, in the end, prevented him from breaking free from a heroic interpretation of it.

This anti-statist reading of the Civil War has persisted from the war’s immediate aftermath, when former Confederate officials and ideologues first articulated it, to the present day, when elected officials in Texas, Mississippi, and elsewhere periodically give vent to it. But as white southern conservatives have migrated into Republican ranks, they necessarily have been loath to blame the origins of federal tyranny on their party. Instead, they have found it to be more expedient to trace federal despotism to the Democratic policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon B. Johnson. Thus, the idea that the Civil War was a power grab circulates along the fringes of American discussions about the conflict, but has never posed a coherent or substantive challenge to the nationalist interpretation of the war.

The African American counter-interpretation of the Civil War also has persisted since the close of the war. This interpretation has also attracted an ever larger constituency as historians influenced by the civil rights movement have begun to ask new questions of the war. But over time, and especially during the past quarter century, the emancipationist view of the war has been incorporated into the nationalist interpretation of the war. Black Americans, as noted above, were confident that the abolition of slavery was much more than an unintended consequence of the conflict. Instead, slavery was the cause of the war and the war had provided the republic with an opportunity to recommit itself to its founding principles. For advocates of this view, the measure of white Americans’ devotion to the legacy of both the Revolution and the Civil War was the degree to which the nation overcame the legacy of slavery and achieved universal equality. From this perspective, the meaning of the Civil War remained unresolved and contingent until African Americans were truly free and equal.

Equally important, in recent decades this line of interpretation has transformed ideas about emancipation. In the older nationalist interpretation, emancipation was bestowed by Lincoln on blacks as a result of wartime necessity.

White actions, in other words, made possible black freedom. Freed people knew otherwise and eventually historians arrived at the same conclusion. Most scholars believe now that slaves forced the hands of the Union by using the Civil War as the pretext for the largest act of self-emancipation in history. When black slaves fled by the thousands to Union lines, they dictated to even recalcitrant Union officials and politicians that antebellum slavery would not be restored, whatever the outcome of the war. And the 200,000 black men who volunteered to fight for the Union made it clear that they expected to enjoy the rights and privileges that military service guaranteed to white soldiers. In other words, the meaning of the Civil War was not arrived at solely by postwar negotiations between generations of white northerners and southerners; it also was defined by the actions of black slaves and soldiers during the war itself.<sup>x</sup>

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That Americans in recent decades have been willing to acknowledge that the Civil War was a war for emancipation has only bolstered the conviction that the conflict was a lamentable but necessary and just war. Indeed, to underscore the principles at stake in the war, Americans now point out that their nation is the only slaveholding society that went to war with itself to destroy the institution. Seen in this light, the Civil War allowed the nation to fulfill its principles and, by extension, its destiny.

Yet for all the divergence between these various conclusions about the significance of the Civil War, it is striking that very few Americans have portrayed it as an absurd, destructive, and unconscionable conflict. In *The Unwritten War*, literary scholar Daniel Aaron pondered the peculiar silences in American musings about the Civil War. Why, he queried in 1973, was the Civil War “the unwritten war”? He conceded that library shelves groaned under the weight of novels, plays, and poetry inspired by the war. But, he lamented, fiction about the war was marred by evasions, silences, and clichés. “The War,” he concluded, “was not so much unfelt as unfaced” in American arts. Writing as the Vietnam War drew to a close, Aaron reasoned that this creative blockage reflected the reluctance of white Americans to acknowledge the salience of slavery and race to the nation’s history, and to the Civil War

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especially. Yet it is also true that Americans, with the exception of a few revisionist historians during the 1930s and 1940s, have been invested in the idea that the war as a cataclysm brought about by irreconcilable and unavoidable forces and that it was a necessary purgative of a national malady, whether sectionalism or slavery. Outside of Stephen Crane’s opaque *The Red Badge of Courage* and, more recently, Charles

Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, the Civil War has generated few works that linger on the human toll of the war; certainly there is no American counterpart to the profoundly cynical depictions of war that followed World War One in Europe. Given the staggering costs of the American Civil War and its lingering scars, it is perhaps understandable that Americans have recoiled from the possibility that the war was anything less than a momentous struggle fought over lofty principles. Firmly held notions of American exceptionalism encourage the idea that Americans fight only just wars and only when all other alternatives have been exhausted. What is striking is not that Americans have concluded that the Civil War was a just and necessary war—a compelling argument can be made in support of that conclusion—but that so few Americans have been interested in exploring the contrary possibility: Had the good war, in fact, been a bad war?

i An important and recent exception is a vigorous critique of the Civil War as a “good war” by David Goldfield, *America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation* (New York, 2011).

ii For a succinct discussion of wartime casualties, see James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York, 1988), 471-477, 854. In General Lee's Army, Joseph Glatthaar concludes that nearly one in every eight men in Lee's army (11.8%) was killed in action. Almost precisely the same number (11.6%) died from disease. Along with those who were killed in accidents, executions, or other non-combat violence, nearly one in every four men (23.9%) died while in military service. Almost three in every ten additional soldiers (28%) were wounded at least once. Another quarter (26.7) additionally was captured before the final surrender. In total, nearly half of all soldiers (48.1%) were killed, wounded, or died of disease, and more than two of every three were either killed, wounded, captured, or died of disease. Glatthaar, *General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse* (New York, 2008).

iii For the impact of the war on the piety of Confederate soldiers, see Kent T. Dollar, *Soldiers of the Cross: Confederate Soldier-Christians and the Impact of War on Their Faith* (Macon, Ga., 2005). The best and most up-to-date introduction to the subject is George C. Rable, *God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2010). Two other important volumes are Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson, eds., *Religion and the American Civil War* (New York, 1998); and Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006).

iv Quoted in Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens, Ga., 1980), 74.

v Quoted in the *Richmond Planet*, December 11, 1897;

vi Three especially valuable discussions of the Northern religious interpretation of the Civil War are Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898* (Baton Rouge, La., 2005); Sean A. Scott, *A Visitation of God: Northern Civilians Interpret the Civil War* (New York, 2011); and Daniel W. Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South, 1863-1877* (New York, 2001).

vii On Lincoln and his policies and ideas on black equality see Paul D. Escott, *“What Shall We Do with the Negro?”: Lincoln, White Racism, and Civil War America* (Charlottesville, Va., 2009), and Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York, 2010).

viii Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York, 1962), 434.

ix On the self-emancipation by slaves, see Ira Berlin, et. al., *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (Cambridge, 1992) and Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009).

x Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (New York, 1973).

# HISTORY™ COMMEMORATES THE 150<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE CIVIL WAR

By Kim Gilmore



Rose O'Neal Greenhow. (1817-1864). American Confederate spy. With her daughter in Old Capital Prison at Washington, D.C. [Credit: The Granger Collection, New York ]

Over the course of over 4 years, starting in April of 1861, the American Civil War shook the nation to its core, leaving more casualties than all other American wars combined. This year, organizations and communities throughout the nation will start a four-year commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the war. Reflecting back on the Civil War gives us all an opportunity to consider the causes and consequences of the war, and to assess the new information scholars have uncovered. HISTORY™ is proud to join with National History Day in providing resources for educators and students as they reconsider the meaning and significance of the Civil War.

As HISTORY™ launches an extensive campaign to observe the sesquicentennial, it is exciting to think about the ways our understanding of the Civil War has transformed in the past few decades. In the broadest sense, historians of the Civil War have expanded what we know about how the events of the war transpired, how individuals and communities were changed by the war, and how the war was experienced on the ground by everyday Americans. Though understanding leaders and generals from the Civil War era will always be an important part of analyzing the Civil War, this new scholarship has afforded students of history a richer view of how diverse groups of people including slaves, free blacks, soldiers from all backgrounds, women, children, and immigrants experienced the war. The enormous consequences and legacies of the war are still matters of great debate today. Historians and young student scholars play an essential role in helping all of us understand why the war happened and how it changed our social and political landscape.

In 2011, HISTORY™ features many new and original on-air Civil War themed programs which will give viewers powerful new perspectives on the enormity of the war and the transformations that resulted from this conflict. The on-air programming will be accompanied by an equally robust set of websites and special content areas on History.com. Together, these resources provide an excellent starting point for National History Day projects. Throughout these on-air programs and on-line sites, teachers and students will find primary source materials and links to additional original sources that will help provide a rich basis for NHD and classroom history projects.

The cornerstone of HISTORY's™ Civil War programming in 2011 (check History.com for dates and times) is an all-new special, *Gettysburg: Their Sacrifice Made America*. During the war and in retrospect, several turning points have taken on amplified meaning, coming to represent larger truths about this profound conflict. The 3-day battle which took place in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania starting on July 1st, 1863 is one of those events. Over 50,000 soldiers lost their lives or were injured in this battle which is forever associated with the intensity and gravity of the war. The epic clash and its aftermath also set the stage for President Lincoln's timeless Gettysburg Address.

Raw, emotional, and immersive, *Gettysburg: Their Sacrifice Made America* puts viewers inside the battle and the town of Gettysburg to gain new insights into a complex and costly battle. Executive produced for HISTORY™ by Ridley and Tony Scott, the duo that created *Gladiator*, *Robin Hood* and *Black Hawk Down*, this feature brings the story of Gettysburg to a new generation of viewers. As many educators know all too well, today's students are captivated by imagery and are saturated with computer-generated representations of reality. But this kind of imagery, known by the shorthand "CGI," can also be an enormously powerful way for students to gain entry into the past.

Stripping away romanticized views of the past, *Gettysburg: Their Sacrifice Made America* introduces little known stories about the every day soldiers and citizens who waged this fierce battle, or were unexpectedly caught up in the crossfire. With compelling CGI and powerful action footage, this *Gettysburg* program can transform students' understanding of the complexity and significance of the Civil War by focusing carefully on those who fought, and those whose lives were changed forever by the battle. The imagery and on-the-ground stories will pull students into the war, and also open up possibilities of analyzing how and why certain events have become central to the overall narrative of the conflict.

Do we remember Gettysburg because of the scale of the event, or because of its significance as a Northern battle? Or, did Lincoln's Gettysburg Address ensure that we would weigh these events more heavily than others in the final analysis of the war? These are critical questions that students can ask before and after they watch. *Gettysburg: Their Sacrifice Made America* and similar new Civil War films will hopefully make students care more deeply about asking and answering these questions by capturing their attention through gripping storytelling and imagery.

The Civil War is an enormous topic with a cavernous well of information to pull from. History.com has developed an engaging way to learn about the key people, places, events and technology that defined America's greatest conflict. This interactive site called "The "Civil War 150" was created with the input of historians and scholars who ranked the crucial things they feel everyone should know about the war. From the well-known to the surprising, this list will be of interest to Civil War enthusiasts as well as new viewers eager to learn more.

The "Civil War 150" list is not intended to be definitive, but is a great starting point for learning the basics and for further conversation. At the site, students can make their own choices and rankings, seeing how their picks compare with those of the historians. Additionally, the site allows students to delve into the texture of the war through six interactive info-graphics on topics such as "Who They Were" and "How They Died." These features give students a visually compelling way to get closer to grasping what the war meant and how it was lived by everyday Americans of all backgrounds.

Lt. Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain of the 20th Maine Regiment was among the many Civil War soldiers who left behind records of their experiences in battle. Chamberlain described the scene of a battle: “But out of that silence rose new sounds more appalling still; a strange ventriloquism, of which you could not locate the source, a smothered moan, as if a thousand discords were flowing together into a key-note weird, unearthly, terrible to hear and bear, yet startling with its nearness...” While the Civil War may seem long past to many students, its legacy is “startling with its nearness” as well. Bringing the voices of those who lived through the Civil War era, like Chamberlain, can help students become motivated to explore the costs, consequences, and enormity of the war.

The Civil War anniversary presents educators and historians with an opportunity to help students grasp the profound consequences of slavery in American society. The role of slavery in the Civil War, the role of African American soldiers in the war, and the consequences for the 4 million slaves who were freed at the end of the war are among the broad topics the 150th anniversary gives us the opportunity to examine. HISTORY™ has called upon some of the nation’s leading Civil War scholars to discuss these topics. Teachers and students can find short video segments on many topics related to slavery and the Civil War online at the following url:

<http://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war>

One of the best ways for teachers, students, and families to learn about the Civil War in a hands-on way is to visit one of the many battlefields and historic sites associated with the war. HISTORY™ is proud to be leading a national effort to encourage all Americans to visit these sites, and to help preserve them for future generations. The “Give 150” campaign is HISTORY’s™ new initiative which invites the public to give contributions to the legacy of the Civil War. These donations will go directly to the National Park Foundation and the Civil War Trust, two organizations actively involved in maintaining and preserving Civil War sites and lands. To learn more about this campaign, visit us online at [www.give150.com](http://www.give150.com).

In addition the “Give 150” campaign, HISTORY™ will also be working with many organizations, including National History Day, over the next four years as the national effort to examine the history and meaning of the Civil War unfolds. The recommended websites and resources below will help lead you to many of the activities and resources these organizations are offering. We look forward to seeing the many National History Day projects that are sure to emerge from this important commemoration.

## RECOMMENDED CIVIL WAR RESOURCES:

### Websites

Below is a list of online resources for Civil War plans and activities. Visit us online at History.com for many more links, original articles and videos.

#### **The Civil War: 150 Years**

<http://www.nps.gov/features/waso/cw150th/>

#### **Civil War Resources: North Carolina Digital Collections**

<http://www.nccivilwar150.com/history/digital-resources.htm>

#### **Civil War Soldiers & Sailors System**

<http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/>

#### **Documenting the American South: The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865**

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/>

#### **Freedmen and Southern Society Project**

<http://www.history.umd.edu/Freedmen/>

#### **History.com**

<http://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war>

#### **Library of Congress**

[http://www.loc.gov/rr/main/uscw\\_rec\\_links/civilwarlinks.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/main/uscw_rec_links/civilwarlinks.html)

#### **LOUISiana Digital Library (American Civil War collections)**

<http://louisdl.louislibraries.org/index.php>

### **Missouri State Archives: Missouri's Union Provost Marshal Papers, 1861-1865**

<http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/provost/>

### **National Archives**

<http://www.archives.gov/research/civil-war/>

### **Smithsonian Institution/National Portrait Gallery**

<http://civilwar.si.edu/>

### **Tennessee State Library and Archives: Civil War Sources**

[http://www.tn.gov/tsla/resources/digital%20collections/digcoll\\_index.htm#civilwar](http://www.tn.gov/tsla/resources/digital%20collections/digcoll_index.htm#civilwar)

### **Texas State Library and Archives Commission: Under the Rebel Flag**

<https://www.tsl.state.tx.us/exhibits/civilwar/index.html>

### **Virginia Memory**

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

## **Books**

In addition to the sources cited in the essays, the books below provide an excellent starting point for further study of the Civil War era; some of them also contain useful resources for classroom lesson plans.

Berlin, Ira, ed., et al. *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War*. (The New Press, 1993).

Blight, David W. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. (Harvard University Press, 2002).

Faust, Drew Gilpin. *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*. (The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Foner, Eric. *The Story of American Freedom*. (W.W. Norton & CO, 1999).

Gallagher, Gary W. *The Union War*. (Harvard University Press, 2011).

Garrison, Webb. *Brady's Civil War: A Collection of Memorable Civil War Images Photographed by Matthew Brady and His Assistants*. (Lyons Press, 2008).

Giesberg, Judith. *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front*. (The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

McPherson, James. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. (Oxford University Press, 2003).

Seidman, Rachel Filene. *The Civil War: A History in Documents*. (Oxford University Press, 2001).

Slotkin, Richard. *No Quarter: The Battle of the Crater, 1864*. (Random House, 2009).

Yacovone, Donald, and Charles Fuller, eds. *Freedom's Journey: African American Voices of the Civil War*. (Lawrence Hill Books, 2004.)

# TEACHING WITH HISTORICAL PLACES

## COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



Civil War: Restaurant. Business seems to be slow at Sutler's bomb proof 'Fruit & Oyster House' on the Union Army line at the siege of Petersburg, Virginia, June 1864 to March 1864. Photograph by Timothy H. O'Sullivan. [Credit: The Granger Collection, New York ]

Historic places have powerful and provocative stories to tell. As witnesses to the past, they recall the events that shaped history and the people who faced those situations and issues. Places make connections across time that give them a special ability to create an empathetic understanding of what happened and why. As historian David McCullough explains in *Brave Companions*, experiencing places “helps in making contact with those who were there before in other days. It’s a way to find them as fellow human beings, as necessary as the digging you do in libraries.”

It is not necessary, though, to visit a place to feel its connections to history. Through a variety of materials and activities, Teaching with Historic Places (TwHP) enables teachers and students to learn from places without leaving the classroom. By examining and questioning readings, documents, maps, photographs, and by engaging in activities, students connect these locations to the broad themes of American history.

Places can help students connect the history all around them with national events and themes. A TwHP lesson based on the courthouse in St. Louis, for example, shows how people there debated a railroad route that would have national impact and how the Dred Scott Supreme Court decision started with a local case. Studying this building will help students understand the importance of their local and state courthouses, as well helping them grasp the significance of historic places generally. Local sites often make a stronger impression on students than those more famous but farther away, thereby sparking their desire to learn more.

Places help students develop skills as well as knowledge. Students learn to observe, gather facts, compare and contrast, synthesize and analyze, evaluate sources of evidence, develop and test hypotheses, and draw conclusions. Places are therefore well-suited to help teachers meet both state and national curriculum standards in social studies, history, geography, and other subjects. One of the ten themes in the Curriculum Standards for Social Studies, for example, is “People, Places, and Environments.” The National Geography Standards use an understanding of the characteristics of and relationships among people, places, and environments as one of the marks of student achievement.

Ultimately, teaching with and about historic places benefits everyone. Educators have one more means with which to engage and excite students, students acquire knowledge from and an appreciation for cultural resources, and society gains a better-educated citizenry.



# Teaching with Historic Places

## Civil War History

### Teaching with Historical Places: Questions to Consider in the Selection Process

1. What historic place would you like to use?
2. What is the story and why is it important? Why is the place an important source of evidence for learning that?
3. How does the place fit into curriculum topics, such as history, geography, social studies, or other subjects?
4. How can the place help students develop learning skills, such as observation, synthesis, and analysis?
5. What questions does the place bring to mind? Where might you find the answers?
6. How could you use the place in the classroom, especially if you could not visit it? What other sources of evidence would be useful?
7. What questions would you most like to ask someone knowledgeable about the site and its history? Where would you find such a person?

## Teaching With Historical Places; When You Arrive.

1. **OVERVIEW:** What do you see? What is your general description of the place and its setting?
2. **DETAILS:** Look closely and identify specific details about location, size, shape, design, arrangement, setting, and other characteristics.
3. **IMPRESSIONS:** What do your observations suggest about the place's age, purpose, function, and evolution?
4. **BIG PICTURE:** What do you think the place suggests about people, events, or ways of life from the past?
5. **EVIDENCE:** Look at your conclusions for Questions 3 and 4. How do you know? What specific clues did the place itself contribute? How influential were previous knowledge or assumptions?
6. **QUESTIONS & ANSWERS:** What questions did the physical evidence raise for you? What information is missing? What else would you like to know? What types of evidence might answer those questions and test your hypotheses? Where would you find that information?

Teaching with Historic Places has posted on the web the following lesson plans that consider a variety of important themes in Civil War history. These lessons, based on sites listed in the National Register of Historic Places, are free and ready for immediate classroom use by students in history and social studies classes.

- **A Nation Repays Its Debt: The National Soldiers' Home and Cemetery in Dayton, Ohio**  
Learn about the evolution of a system to honor and care for U.S. veterans beginning with the creation of soldiers' homes and national cemeteries during and after the Civil War.
- **Andersonville: Prisoner of War Camp**  
Examine conditions of the Civil War's most notorious prison, and learn how inmates were able to cope.
- **The Battle of Bentonville: Caring for Casualties of the Civil War**  
Understand how battlefield medical care developed during the Civil War, particularly in the Union Army.
- **The Battle of Glorieta Pass: A Shattered Dream**  
Discover how the Battle of Glorieta Pass ended the Confederacy's dream of expanding westward to the Pacific Ocean.
- **The Battle of Honey Springs: The Civil War Comes to the Indian Territory**  
Learn how the Civil War created fierce conflicts among American Indian nations who had been moved across the Mississippi River.
- **The Battle of Mill Springs: The Civil War Divides a Border State**  
Use one of the Civil War's key early battles to understand the conflicts that faced border states such as Kentucky during and after the war.
- **The Battle of Prairie Grove: Civilian Recollections of the Civil War**  
Understand the violence of the Civil War through the eyes of young women whose homes were in the midst of an important battle and continuing conflict.
- **The Battle of Stones River: The Soldiers' Story**  
Recall one of the Civil War's bloodiest battles, which raged through the rocky cedar glades of Tennessee, as told in eyewitness and personal accounts.
- **Chatham Plantation: Witness to the Civil War**  
Learn why this home in Fredericksburg, Virginia, was a center of military activity, and consider the impact the war had on those whose property became part of the battlefield.
- **Choices and Commitments: The Soldiers at Gettysburg**  
Trace the course of this Civil War battle and consider the wrenching personal choices that were made by soldiers on each side.
- **Clara Barton's House: Home of the American Red Cross**  
Follow Barton's remarkable career as a leader of charitable causes, from caring for the wounded on Civil War battlefields to founding the American Red Cross.

- **First Battle of Manassas: An End to Innocence**  
Study personal accounts of soldiers who fought in the first battle of the Civil War, and discover how the day set the tone for the many bloody battles to come.
- **Fort Morgan and the Battle of Mobile Bay**  
Follow Admiral Farragut’s attack on Fort Morgan and Mobile Bay, and consider the human reaction to technologies such as ironclads and underwater mines.
- **Fort Pickens and the Outbreak of the Civil War**  
Discover why Fort Pickens was so valuable to both the Union and Confederacy, and follow the actions of the military commanders faced with crucial decisions.
- **Glorieta and Raton Passes: Gateways to the Southwest**  
Follow the Confederacy’s quest to conquer the American Southwest and the Union Army’s valiant campaign to obstruct the advancing soldiers.
- **Lincoln Home National Historic Site: A Place of Growth and Memory**  
Learn how Abraham Lincoln’s belief in freedom and democracy, his eloquence, and the support of family and community propelled him to the White House and uplifted him through the turbulent Civil War.
- **Not to Be Forgotten: Camp Chase Confederate Cemetery**  
Learn about the history of Camp Chase in Columbus, Ohio, and about the federal government’s policies guiding the marking of POW graves during and after the Civil War.
- **President Lincoln’s Cottage: A Retreat**  
Explore President Abraham Lincoln’s life at a country retreat during summer months and examine the work he completed there on the Emancipation Proclamation.
- **The Siege and Battle of Corinth: A New Kind of War**  
Understand how newly developed technologies affected two military engagements and one tiny town in Mississippi during the Civil War.
- **The Siege of Port Hudson: “Forty Days and Nights in the Wilderness of Death”**  
Understand the importance of the Mississippi to both the North and South during the Civil War, and the differences between a siege and a regular battle.
- **These Honored Dead: The Battle of Rivers Bridge and Civil War Combat Casualties**  
Learn how veteran soldiers adapted to the technological changes that had increased the deadliness of the battlefield, and understand the cost of the Civil War in human terms.

To learn more about TwHP’s other lessons, visit the [Lesson Plan Descriptions page at http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/twhp/descrip.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/twhp/descrip.htm).



CIVIL WAR  
1861-1865

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