

**Agency in the Pursuit of Freedom: A study of Black Soldiers from Northeast
Florida during the Civil War**

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how Black soldiers exercised agency during the Civil War in pursuit of a changing sense of freedom. It builds on the work of Civil War and African American historians from the past thirty years, reevaluating the role and impact of Black soldiers and their service within the broader context of the Civil War. While much existing research views these Black soldiers as part of a larger group, this study focuses on the lives and experiences of individual Black soldiers from Northeast Florida. By combining these overlooked stories with a less-studied theater of the conflict, a new perspective on the war emerges—one that underscores the influence Black men had in shaping major government and military policies and in transforming the Civil War into a war of emancipation. Well before the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, Black men and women in Northeast Florida escaped slavery in large numbers through self-emancipatory actions. On a nonlinear journey, these men and women compelled the U.S. military to become unwitting agents of freedom and quickly shifted the debate from emancipation to Black enlistment. While politicians and military officials argued, hundreds of Black men worked alongside abolitionist white officers to form some of the earliest Black regiments in the war. Their enlistment process offers a window into the unique history and environment that shaped their lives. After enlisting, they began a social transformation within the military landscape. Their ability to navigate change and continuity became evident in the success of two expeditions in early 1863, where local knowledge and a willingness to assert their agency led to triumph and set a precedent for future Black recruitment. However, these achievements provoked significant backlash from the enemy and within the U.S. military. Facing persistent

racism and white supremacy on multiple fronts, these men continued to act and resist in accordance to a desire for freedom that now included equality and citizenship. That struggle extended beyond the war, with similar successes and setbacks experienced during their military service. Throughout it all, their exercise of agency as a form of resistance clearly demonstrates their active and multifaceted role in the Civil War.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure

In the preparation of this dissertation, the following Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used: Grammarly, Google AI, and ChatGPT. These tools were used primarily to edit writing, search for secondary sources, and provide generic citations that I then adapted to specific sources. The author acknowledges full responsibility for the intellectual content of this work and has ensured that all AI-assisted sections have been reviewed and revised for accuracy and appropriate academic style. All AI-generated content was reviewed and validated for relevance, appropriateness, and accuracy before incorporation into the final document to maintain scholarly integrity of this research.

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List of Abbreviations

- CMSR US, Civil War Service Records (CMSR) – Union – Colored Troops 20th-25th Infantry and 31st-35th Infantry, 1861-1865 Carded Records Showing Military Service of Soldiers Who Fought in Volunteer Organizations During the American Civil War, compiled 1890-1912, documenting the period 1861-1866, Record Group 94, Roll 0025, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
- OR United States War Department. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1894.
- ORN United States Naval War Records Office and United States Office of Naval Records and Library. *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1894–1922.

Introduction

Driving north on Fletcher Avenue, which runs along the coast of Amelia Island, one encounters the quintessential Florida beach town of Fernandina. The island, situated in the northeast corner of Florida, measures approximately 13 miles long and 4 miles wide. Luxurious beach resorts, golf courses, newly constructed beach houses, vacation rentals, and Airbnbs line both sides of this small two-lane highway, interspersed with a few older homes. Beach access signs dot the road for the numerous tourists eager to enjoy the picturesque beaches and the Atlantic Ocean. At the end of the road, large apartment complexes, hotels, and businesses increasingly dominate the landscape. The street culminates in a large parking lot surrounded by restaurants, stores, a spacious green area, a playground, and ocean views. A nearby side road leading to Fort Clinch State Park escapes the modern landscape and offers a more natural one. Dense forests and undergrowth border the small paved road. The frequent appearance of trees adorned with hanging Spanish moss creates an image of an idyllic Southern landscape. At the end of the road lies the parking lot for tourists to explore the preserved and reconstructed remains of Fort Clinch or to walk along one of the nearby nature trails. The fort, which began construction in 1847, features inner and outer pentagonal brick walls with five bastions at the corners. Between the walls is a mound of earth topped with several replicas of cannons. Inside the fort stand several preserved buildings, including a two-story brick barracks. While scenic, this landscape masks a history of Black Americans during the American Civil War that, for far too long, has gone unseen and unrecognized.¹

¹ There are occasional references to the Civil War era in the landscape that, although easy to overlook, exist. Fort Clinch and the adjacent museum reference the Fort's role as a United States military base

Considering what is unseen in this modern landscape, two questions arise: what history and stories lie hidden, and what significance do those stories hold?

Unbeknownst to the thousands of tourists who visit this town, and likely to the residents as well, this small area of Northeast Florida served as a significant United States military base and one of the largest federal refugee camps for Black-freed people along the South Atlantic coast throughout the Civil War. Even in taking a historic and scientific boat tour of the area, little to no mention is made of the hundreds of formerly enslaved individuals who flocked to the area, how many of those men enlisted in the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment and conducted expeditions and raids in the area, or how the United States Army formed the 21st USCI in Fernandina.² Other nearby areas of Northeast Florida, such as Jacksonville and St. Augustine, also feature a similar disconnect between what happened in the past and what can be seen today. Beneath the picturesque modern landscape dominated by beach tourism and urban centers lay the stories of thousands of Black men and women whose actions during the Civil War would profoundly reshape their lives and the war itself.³

during the Civil War. Nestled within the island's residential areas stands the First Missionary Baptist Church. According to the plaque in front of the Church, enslaved individuals founded it in 1860 under the leadership of its first pastor, William Rose. However, the plaque also notes that the original church building was located in another area of the town. The current church was constructed in 1874. The Merrick-Simmons house, built sometime before the Civil War, served as a wartime hospital, a freedmen's school, and an orphanage for Black children during the conflict, and it still stands today. However, since the house is private, no historical information is presented at or in front of it.

² In the fall of 2025, I went with my family on one of these guided boat tours out of Fernandina Harbor. The tour left the harbor and went across the St. Marys and along the back side of Cumberland Island. During the tour, our guide spoke knowledgeably about Fernandina's history under the Spanish and its involvement in piracy and the international slave trade. In discussing Fort Clinch, he made a short mention of the fort serving as a United States military base during the Civil War. Much of the tour was devoted to the history of Cumberland Island, particularly its ownership by the Carnegie Family.

³ For other notable works that explore the creation of historical narratives on physical and cultural landscapes and the silencing of particular narratives in the American South and the United States more broadly, see W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); Jeannette A. Bastian, "Records, Memory, and Space: Locating Archives in the Landscape," *Public History Review* 21 (2014); Stephanie E. Yuhl, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Centering the Domestic Slave Trade in American Public History," *Journal of Southern History*

Fernandina and Amelia Island sit on the northeast corner of Florida, bordered by the St. Marys River to the north, the Amelia River to the west, and the Nassau River to the south. Amelia Island is just one among many islands forming the southern edge of the Sea Islands. The Sea Islands consist of over a hundred barrier islands stretching from South Carolina to Northeast Florida. This chain extends south of Amelia Island with Black Hammock Island, Big and Little Talbot Island, and Fort George Island. Like many Sea Islands along this chain, these islands are surrounded by large rivers such as the St. Marys, Nassau, and St. Johns, along with small creeks, swamps, and tidal marshes that experience a tidal range of five to six feet. Beneath these barrier islands lies the mouth of the St. Johns River. The south-to-north flowing river is Florida's longest, stretching approximately 310 miles from Indian River County to the Atlantic Ocean. Throughout much of Florida's history, the river has served as a crucial water highway, fostering the development of several cities along its banks, including Jacksonville and Palatka. The slow-moving river reaches depths of up to 40 or 47 feet near Jacksonville and its mouth. St. Augustine lies 35 to 40 miles south of the St. Johns' mouth. Known as one of the United States' oldest continuously inhabited European settlements, dating to its founding by the Spanish in 1565, the city lies at the confluence of the Tolomato and Matanzas Rivers. Like Jacksonville and Fernandina, the area around St. Augustine consists of small creeks, swamps, and marshes.

As it relates to the Civil War, these areas, which once served as vital sites for enslaved Black individuals seeking freedom and for U.S. military operations involving

79, no. 3 (August 2013). The 1st and 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiments would later become the 33rd and 34th USCI, respectively. However, given the attachment the men had to their original designation, this work will maintain the reference to the 1st South Carolina throughout.

regiments of the United States Colored Infantry (USCI), now suffer from varying degrees of a dual-layered absence in their cultural landscape and historical literature that obscures their significance to Civil War history and Black history. This dual absence arises from a widespread ignorance in the collective consciousness about Florida's role in the Civil War, as well as from both local and national efforts to diminish or overlook the contributions of Black men and women during that time.⁴ The impact of this void is evident in the lack of memorialization in the area's modern landscape and extends to a lack of research and knowledge about this time and place. Narrative works on the Civil War, such as James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom*, which contribute immensely to the general understanding of the war among the American public, provide few references to events that took place in Florida. Even within Florida itself, knowledge of the state's Civil War events remains largely unrecognized. The current Florida state education history standards include the teaching of the Civil War and the roles of enslaved and free Black individuals. Still, these standards offer only a broad overview of the conflict, lacking significant regional details, individual stories, and crucial Civil War sites such as Fernandina, Key West, or Pensacola.⁵

Given the limited literature and instruction regarding Florida's role in the conflict, the absence of stories about Black men and women from the state during the war

⁴ For a further discussion and examination of how silences enter the archives and historical consciousness, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). He notes that silences enter the process of historical knowledge at fact creation, fact assembly, fact retrieval, and retrospective significance. Fact retrieval and retrospective significance are particularly relevant to this study, as well as the physical and intellectual absences regarding the history of Black Americans in Florida during the Civil War.

⁵ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Florida Department of Education, *Florida's State Academic Standards – Social Studies, 2023*, 2023, <https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/20653/urlt/6-4.pdf>.

comes as no surprise. As noted by historians like David Blight, the widespread acceptance of reconciliationist and Lost Cause narratives in the late 19th century came at the expense of the ignorance of the central role of Black Americans and slavery in the conflict. The eschewing of this history for narratives that emphasized national unity or white supremacy created a historical amnesia that has plagued this country for around a century. Despite efforts by Black historians such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Joseph T. Wilson to write the experiences of Black Americans into the broader narrative of the war and Reconstruction, the overall narrative did not begin to change significantly until the 1990s and early 2000s. Books like *Forged in Battle*, *The Negro's Civil War*, *Firebrand of Liberty*, and others represented important attempts by historians to correct these past injustices and to narrate the history of Black Americans during this era more comprehensively. These efforts bore fruit beyond academia, as seen in movies like "Glory," which received critical acclaim for its portrayal of the 54th Massachusetts Colored Regiment. More recently, the nation's largest public history organization, the National Park Service, has worked to incorporate Black history into its interpretation of Civil War sites such as the Reconstruction Era National Historical Park in Beaufort, South Carolina; Camp Nelson Civil War Heritage Park in Kentucky; and Fort Monroe in Virginia.⁶ These examples have encouraged a reframing of the general narrative to better appreciate the stories, roles, and actions of Black men and women. However,

⁶ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 22; W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998); Joseph T. Wilson, *The Black Phalanx: African American Soldiers in the War of Independence, the War of 1812, and the Civil War* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Company, 1888); Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: The Free Press, 1990); Stephen V. Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments That Changed the Course of the Civil War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008); Douglas R. Egerton, *Thunder at the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments that Redeemed America* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

despite these important works, the story of Black Americans during this crucial point in American history still struggles to integrate into the general narratives of the war and the broader historical consciousness.

In Florida, the obscuring of the contributions of Black Floridians before the war even ended. In the war's final year, United States General and Provisional Governor of Florida, William Marvin, declared that Blacks in the state "fought in no battles; or if engaged at all in such, they were trifling affairs."⁷ In the early 1900s, William Watson Davis, a member of the Dunning School, made scant mention of the contributions of Black Floridians in his book, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida*. He referred to their services to the Union as "guide, spy, and plunderers, who usually gave way under determined attack."⁸ Charlton Tebeau devoted a single and inaccurate sentence to Black soldiers serving in the United States Army in his history of Florida: "General Rufus Saxton, the Union commander of the Department of the South, toward the end of the war used refugee Negroes as guides and received permission to enroll them as soldiers...mostly at the end of the conflict."⁹ Works like these, combined with the words of politicians like Marvin, contributed to the notion that Black Floridians "served only briefly and peripherally in Florida and that they and their actions lacked both individuality and agency."¹⁰

⁷ Irvin D. S. Winsboro, "Give Them Their Due: A Reassessment of African Americans and Union Military Service in Florida during the Civil War," *The Journal of African American History* 92, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 327.

⁸ William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1913), 234-235. The Dunning School refers to a group of historians taught and trained by William Archibald Dunning of Columbia University in the late 19th to early 20th centuries. Their works portrayed Reconstruction as a tragic mistake wherein radical Republicans victimized Southern whites and African Americans lack of ability to participate in politics led to the failures of Reconstruction governments. The narrative set forth by these works became the dominant narrative in the country for decades.

⁹ Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), 236.

¹⁰ Winsboro, "Give Them Their Due," 328.

Recently, historians have aimed to address these gaps in understanding. Stephen Ash's *Firebrand of Liberty* provides a detailed look at the 1st and 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiments, two of the three regiments that included men from Northeast Florida. He traces their journey from formation and training in Hilton Head, South Carolina, to their expedition along the St. Marys in winter 1863, and finally to their occupation of Jacksonville in spring 1863. Through the story of these regiments, Ash highlights their significance in changing the perception of Black soldiers in the eyes of the federal government and the Northern public. Their achievements set the groundwork for increased Black enlistment across the country.¹¹ Another work, *Thunder on the River* by Daniel Schafer, highlights the events of the Civil War in Northeast Florida. Taking a more holistic approach, Schafer examines the war in this often-overlooked area, exploring both sides of the conflict, the stark divide between white Confederates and white Unionists, the four U.S. military occupations of Jacksonville, the naval battles on the St. Johns River, and the role of Black Americans, especially in the largest Civil War battle in Florida, the Battle of Olustee.¹² Viewed together, these books advocate for a renewed appreciation of Florida's role in the larger conflict. However, while both books highlight the emancipatory efforts and military service of Black Americans in this region, the individual stories of these Black men and women often become overshadowed by other narratives. Readers will gain a better understanding of Black Floridians overall, but will still miss many of the personal stories that make this history memorable and engaging.

¹¹ Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*.

¹² Daniel L. Schafer, *Thunder on the River: The Civil War in Northeast Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010).

This work builds on the efforts of these previous historians by making the lives and experiences of Black soldiers from this region the central focus of the narrative. Seen through the actions and lives of Black Floridians, this area of the war saw a dramatic reshaping of its objectives to include emancipation. Their lived experiences demonstrate how individual and collective actions influenced significant changes in government and the military and offer an image of what might have been had the U.S. military used these soldiers to their full potential. This reframing of the story challenges the idea that Blacks were passive participants in the conflict, involved only when prompted by the U.S. government. Instead of the government and military leading their actions, the decisions and efforts of these Black men and women on the ground forced the U.S. to enact major policy shifts in how it fought the war. Through their diverse actions, these individuals continued a legacy of resistance and emancipation unique to Florida, reaching back for decades. Changing the narrative shifts the deeper meaning of the conflict from one where the two sides fought over differing views of the Constitution to one that reflects a massive enslaved rebellion. Like earlier enslaved uprisings in the United States and around the world, these enslaved individuals collectively took part in emancipation and engaged in armed resistance. Ignoring such clear evidence would mean knowingly dismissing history. Therefore, by viewing the war through their eyes and emphasizing their actions, an alternative story emerges—showing that these freedmen from Northeast Florida took part in the largest and most successful enslaved rebellion in U.S. history.¹³

¹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998); Lorien Foote, *Rites of Retaliation: Civilization, Soldiers, and Campaigns in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

This study will explore the stories of these freed individuals, both individually and collectively, from their enslavement and enlistment to their military experiences and lives after the war. In some ways, a study using a similar approach of narrating a significant story in a small setting could apply to other wartime regions; however, what makes the stories of these individuals unique stems from the historical context that shaped the environment and society of northeastern Florida. Throughout the Colonial era, European powers—France, Spain, and Great Britain—competed against each other and Native Americans for control of northeast Florida until it became a U.S. territory in the 1800s. The contested nature of this region made it a borderland area, creating a unique environment for the development of slavery and racial dynamics. As control of the territory shifted among these different powers, each left distinct political and cultural marks that influenced the practice of slavery and race relations. The stories of many Black Floridian U.S. soldiers illustrate these historical conditions. The area's historical legacy of emancipation through waterways, enslaved resistance, and refuge sites in Fernandina and St. Augustine further contributes to the region's significance and distinctiveness.¹⁴

Additionally, the direct connection between the Black men and women of Northeast Florida and the Gullah Geechee people of the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands further sets this story apart. Although Northeast Florida is now considered part of the Gullah Geechee Corridor, that has not always been the case. As historian Melissa L. Cooper notes, the “coastal South Carolina blacks had, for decades before

¹⁴ Larry Eugene Rivers, *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000); Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Canter Brown Jr., “Race Relations in Territorial Florida, 1821–1845,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (1995).

the interwar years, been known as peculiar ‘Gullah’ folk. Coastal Georgia Blacks had not.”¹⁵ Given the lack of historical connection, it becomes crucial to explicitly link the men and women enslaved in the Fernandina, Jacksonville, and St. Augustine areas to this ancestral heritage and culture. Known mainly for its Gullah language that persists today, the Gullah people carry forward a cultural legacy shaped under slavery on isolated plantations, which allowed them to retain African linguistic influences, as well as African cultural expressions and religious practices. Identifying the Black men and women of Northeast Florida as Gullah Geechee adds important historical context and meaning to their experiences during antebellum slavery, their unique cultural expressions and religious practices during that time, and their lives through Reconstruction as they continued to carry this rich culture and history into the present era.¹⁶

As the war began, enslaved individuals in the area not only understood the conflict but also grasped its stakes. Many enslaved men and women did not passively wait for the U.S. military and government to grant them freedom; instead, they actively sought to free themselves and end the institution that had oppressed them and their families for generations. By the time Lincoln officially issued the Emancipation Proclamation, hundreds of formerly enslaved Blacks had already escaped slavery, and some had volunteered and served in an all-Black regiment of the United States Army.

¹⁵ Melissa L. Cooper, *Making Gullah: A History of Sapelo Islanders, Race, and the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 8; Edda L. Fields-Black, *Combee: Harriet Tubman, the Combahee River Raid, and Black Freedom during the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), xxvii-xxviii

¹⁶ Cooper, *Making Gullah*; Mason Crum, *Gullah: Negro Life in the Carolina Sea Islands* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968); William S. Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999); Virginia Meacham Gould, ed., *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry: The Atlantic World and the Gullah Geechee* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

Their journey from enslavement to enlistment involved more than a single moment of emancipation, but rather a process that unfolded over varying lengths of time and distance. This journey included their escape from slavery and, often, time spent in refugee camps along the coast, including in Fernandina. Their escape often did not occur linearly, required active effort, and involved great risk. Through their proactive measures in seeking emancipation and refuge, these men and women forced the U.S. military, especially the U.S. Navy, to become unwitting agents of freedom.¹⁷

These self-emancipatory actions also changed the discussion about the role of Blacks in the war. Soon, those debates shifted from whether the U.S. military would help end slavery to the U.S. military enlisting formerly enslaved men. As politicians and military officials debated their participation, Black men acted in concert with abolitionist white officers to form Black regiments made up of free and formerly enslaved men. Despite setbacks, their combined efforts effectively pressured the U.S. government and military to acknowledge the reality on the ground—that Black men would actively participate in this war and in ending slavery. Their enlistment and resistance would redefine the meaning of the war as both the North and South grappled with its true nature and consequences.¹⁸

A careful and detailed examination of the enlistment process offers an opportunity to understand the unique history, society, and environment of Florida that

¹⁷ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*; Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro in Our History* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1922); Berlin, “Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and Its meanings in American Life,” in *Union and Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era*, ed. David Blight and Brooks Simpson (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997), 105-122; James McPherson, *Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); David Williams, *I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁸ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*.

shaped these men. As Ira Berlin notes in *Many Thousands Gone*, the circumstances of enslavement varied from “place to place and time to time.”¹⁹ The enlistment records offer a glimpse into the unique history of colonial and antebellum Florida. This analysis provides further insights into a legacy of resistance and the use of agency under enslavement, illustrates what might have motivated them to serve, how enlistment impacted the wives, children, and kin they left behind, and the racism they encountered from the military they pledged to serve. Beneath the demographic and personal details given to military officials lie individual stories that make the process and significance of enlistment more personal.

When these men enlisted, they began a social transformation, facing a landscape of change and continuity they had to navigate. Their ability to handle the complexities of a military camp and training environment helped set a precedent for broader service by Black soldiers, as they drew on resistance strategies developed during slavery amidst widespread scrutiny from their white officers, the U.S. government and military, and the Confederacy. For these men from Florida, their chance to prove themselves as soldiers came during two expeditions in early 1863 along the St. Marys and St. Johns Rivers. In both expeditions, these soldiers, individually and collectively, had a significant impact on military decision-making and mission success through their intimate knowledge of the area’s geography and willingness to assert their agency. When given the opportunity, these men surpassed the expectations of their commanders and the Northern public. Their successful service demonstrated the

¹⁹ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 3.

capabilities of Black soldiers and provided a model for the U.S. Army to potentially follow throughout the rest of the war.

Despite their early successes, these men quickly realized that freedom from slavery did not equate to their evolving understanding of freedom that included equality and citizenship. As they fought for this new idea of freedom, they faced the persistent realities of racism and white supremacy that placed restrictions on their liberty. In their struggle for freedom, these men battled various forms of racism, faced different enemies, and fought on multiple fronts. Yet, in facing this complex fight, they kept asserting their agency through individual and collective acts of resistance. Their ability to navigate this intricate battlefield would have immediate and long-lasting effects on their military service and their lives after the war.

As the war ended and these men looked ahead to life in a post-slavery America, many returned to St. Augustine, Fernandina, and Jacksonville. In these towns, the men, now veterans, aimed to build their lives, families, and communities amid an era of racial tension and discrimination. Despite the tough conditions of the Reconstruction period, many of these men achieved personal success and stability. They found various forms of freedom through wage labor, voting, family creation, and land ownership. This stability came from tireless effort and resilience, exemplified by their fight for Civil War pensions.

Undergirding the experiences of these men through emancipation, enlistment, military service, and Reconstruction lay an evolving sense of freedom. A defining feature of American politics and society throughout history, freedom carries a unique distinction of being a term that is often used but not always fully understood. As

President Abraham Lincoln once said, “we all declare for liberty but in using the same word we do not mean the same thing.”²⁰ This raises the question: what did freedom mean to these Black men from Northeast Florida? Finding the answer raises significant issues. Since many of these men grew up enslaved and thus unable to learn to read or write, there are no journals or diaries from them that reveal or suggest their understanding of freedom. Their military records, including the Compiled Military Service and Pension Records, do not contain their perspectives on such matters. Some rare insights into their understanding of this abstract concept can be found in writings by others, such as white officers like Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Seth Rogers, or Northern philanthropists like Esther Hawks. Their journals and memoirs include some words of formerly enslaved men serving in the United States Colored Infantry, but unfortunately rarely do these sources fully clarify how these men understood freedom in their own words or how their views changed throughout the war. However, these sources do offer an important piece to the puzzle: their actions. With little to no words to go by, a careful examination of what these men chose to do can reveal the clearest insights. In his seminal work, *The Story of American Freedom*, historian Eric Foner emphasizes two key points about freedom that this work highlights. First, that the meanings of freedom evolved over time through conflicts “between dominant and dissenting views have constantly reshaped the idea’s meaning.”²¹

²⁰ Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. IV, (New Brunswick: NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1953), 301-302, quoted in Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 97.

²¹ Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, xv. For an in-depth biographical study of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, see Douglas R. Egerton, *A Man on Fire: The Worlds of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025).

Second, that beneath its various dimensions, freedom is connected to the inherent ability for these men and women to consciously make decisions and act accordingly, otherwise known as agency. The term agency stands among a few other concepts or terms wherein many use the term in public life as if there exists a self-evident definition of the term. In other words, agency is a concept that is frequently used but not always understood. For decades, historians have debated the meaning of the term and its use to frame arguments and narratives. Emerging from the rise of social history, the notion of agency sought to highlight the actions of historical actors that had previously existed as a footnote in broader narratives focused on prominent leaders and institutions. Through this incorporation of agency, social historians sought to portray the marginalized of history as people with the ability to act and not solely to be acted upon.²²

As part of this rich debate, historians have used agency in their study of enslaved people, particularly in the American South. Historians of slavery like Stephanie Camp and Walter Johnson have highlighted the importance of agency in studying enslaved people. In a system designed to maintain total control over the enslaved, agency provided a means to better analyze and understand the actions of enslaved individuals. However, as pointed out by historian Walter Johnson, the use of agency has, in some

²² Stephanie M. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1, 2003; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (London: Bradford & Dickens, 1943), 23; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963); W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

ways, become a crutch for historians that potentially limits the insightfulness of their work or conflates agency with terms such as resistance and humanity. An example given by Johnson illustrates that the studies focused on agency often seek to restore a sense of humanity to their historical actors.²³ As admirable as these efforts might seem on the surface, historian William H. Sewell Jr. notes that they derive from the faulty premise that the existence of agency for this group is debatable when “a capacity for agency is as much a given for humans as the capacity for respiration.”²⁴ Furthermore, Johnson notes that, “by continuing to frame their works as “discoveries” of Black humanity...historians unwittingly reproduce the incised terms and analytical limits of a field of contest framed by the white-supremacist assumptions which made it possible to ask such a question in the first place.”²⁵

This work joins Johnson in viewing agency as something inherent to every individual with no need to establish its existence. Rather, this study looks beyond the “discovery” of their agency to examine the exercise of that agency within historical contexts that shaped its use and imposed limitations. While agency innately exists for every individual, the exercise of that agency spans a broad spectrum of contexts and contingencies that create unique experiences for each person. Therefore, within this study, the notion of agency serves a two-fold purpose. First, as a means to analyze the individual lives of Black men by examining the life-changing decisions they faced in a wartime environment that presented significant opportunities and constraints. To

²³ Johnson, “On Agency,” 113-114;

²⁴ Quoted in William H. Sewell, Jr., “Is Agency a Useful Historical Concept?” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1, 2003; Timothy Burke, “Meanings of Agency, Agency of Meaning: on Synthesis and Entanglement,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1, 2003, 388; Angela Elisabeth Zimmerman, “Agency, Politics, and the “Impossible Domestic”: A Response to Walter Johnson’s “On Agency”, “ *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1, 2003, 448.

²⁵ Johnson, “On Agency,” 114.

examine, as noted by Sewell, “their specific circumstances—the cultural, social, and material resources at their disposal” and to examine “the specific historical conditions that shaped their lives.”²⁶ While many Black men and women would make similar decisions on many occasions, the focus on individual stories provides compelling examples of times when individuals made decisions that went against the norm but, upon further examination of the circumstances, make logical sense.²⁷ Secondly, this work examines the consequences and implications of the exercise of agency on an individual and collective level. At times, the decisions and actions of individuals would have an outsized impact on their lives or an expedition. However, taken together, these numerous actions combine to generate tremendous influence on military and government policy regarding emancipation, the enlistment of Black soldiers, the treatment of those soldiers, and the nature of the war. Therefore, drawing on these historians, this work focuses on and analyzes the varying exercises of agency by the men throughout their wartime experience to demonstrate how their view of freedom as the emancipation from slavery quickly evolved into a freedom based on equality and citizenship.²⁸

Moreover, agency provides a methodological lens to view and better understand the experiences of Black Americans during this dynamic time. The paucity of writings produced by the hands of these soldiers require alternative means to learn of and analyze their experience. Although the various military records and writings of white contemporaries offer valuable accounts of these men's actions, they also have some

²⁶ Sewell, “Is Agency a Useful Historical Concept?” 437; Burke, “Meanings of Agency, Agency of Meaning,” 389, 391; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 177

²⁷ Burke, “Meanings of Agency, Agency of Meaning,” 391.

²⁸ Burke, “Meanings of Agency, Agency of Meaning,” 396; Sewell, “Is Agency a Useful Historical Concept?”, 440.

limitations worth noting. Whenever using the writings of white individuals from this area, one must carefully consider the second-hand nature of the account and the racial bias that influenced the author. Within the United States military and government, there existed a wide spectrum of views on slavery and race; this variety of perspectives extended to the officers of the United States Colored Infantry.²⁹ Even someone as racially progressive as Higginson still demonstrated his paternal notions of race in his discussion of his men as “children.”³⁰ However, when examining these works, the focus is not on what these men and women thought, but rather on what they saw. Their eyes witnessed countless manifestations of freedom by Black men and women. Similarly, the military records, the Compiled Military Service Records (CMSR), and the Pension records require careful consideration, especially regarding their creation. The creation of the CMSR came through the efforts of the War Department by compiling original muster rolls and other records, such as enlistment, prisoner, and medical reports, years after the war. The possibility of human error exists in the compilation process, as well as a greater possibility of error during the creation of the original record by the white officer or from the Black recruits either intentionally or accidentally providing misinformation. Therefore, it becomes important to corroborate these records with pension records or contemporary journals and diaries. Pension records often offer clear stories and instances of decision and action related to antebellum slavery, emancipation, wartime experiences, and the physical toll of service. They can also reveal family relationships and long-standing kinship networks. However, not all pension records contain this

²⁹ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 35-39.

³⁰ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1870), 16-17, 29, 52.

information. Since these records served to verify military service, the origins of injury, or family relationships, the questions from federal agents limited the details about personal life. Additionally, many affidavits and witness testimonies in pension applications were transcribed by federal agents. Recognizing these limitations does not mean dismissing these sources but highlights their complexity. When conducting this kind of history, especially concerning Black history, historians must critically evaluate the sources available.³¹

In his study of Gettysburg National Military Park, historian Edward Tabor Linenthal notes how "sacred" places like Gettysburg can seduce visitors with pageantry and drama, allowing them to "easily ignore the enduring legacy of the Civil War."³² In stark contrast to the absences in Fernandina, Jacksonville, and St. Augustine, Gettysburg has long served as a visible space where veterans could join hands in reconciliation and reunion. Visitors can simultaneously "recover the epic excitement of the Civil War and...forget its horror" or, perhaps, as Bruce Catton hoped, gain "a vantage point for that long look back into our past to find the meaning that lies beneath the tragedy."³³ But what if other sacred grounds exist that provide a vision of the war unobscured by the dominant narratives of reconciliation and reunion, instead emulating the "new birth of freedom" and the "great task remaining before us," as spoken by

³¹ Holly A Pinheiro Jr., *The Families' Civil War: Black Soldiers and the Fight for Racial Justice* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2022), 159-160; For a detailed examination of the use of pensions in researching Black soldiers, their families, and their communities, see Fields-Black, *Combee*, xxiv-xxvi; National Archives and Records Administration, "Civil War Records: Basic Research Sources," last modified 2024, <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war/resources>.

³² Edward T. Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 117.

³³ Edward T. Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 90, 100.

Lincoln in his famed address? Through places like Fernandina and the stories of these people, new sacred grounds are uncovered. The contextualization of their exercises of agency produces numerous insights into the dramatic changes they faced, how they often astutely navigated this mercurial environment, and how their decision and actions impact their lives and the war in a variety of ways; thus revealing a perspective of the war that better demonstrates the "meaning that lies beneath the tragedy."³⁴

³⁴;*Gettysburg Times*, June 28, 1863; Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address," November 19, 1863, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 7:23.

Chapter 1: The Journey of Emancipation

On April 12, 1861, artillery from the newly formed Confederate States of America fired upon United States Army soldiers stationed at Fort Sumter, located at the mouth of Charleston Harbor in South Carolina. This attack followed decades of increasing sectional tensions between the Northern and Southern states. The election of President Abraham Lincoln in November 1860 pushed many white southerners to support secession. Many who sought secession feared that the incoming Republican administration would threaten their “constitutional” right to enslave Black people. From these anxieties arose the decision to secede from the United States and establish a separate nation.³⁵ Tensions between the two sides continued to escalate until that fateful April day in 1861 when the cannon fire on Fort Sumter propelled the country into a civil war. While many on both sides of the conflict viewed this as strictly a war over competing interpretations of the United States Constitution, the underlying issue of slavery became an indisputable fact.³⁶

Even in the remote corners of the country, like Northeast Florida, Black men and women recognized the unprecedented opportunity the war presented. More than a year after Fort Sumter, in the summer of 1862, recruitment of Black men into the U.S. Army significantly increased following a number of successful expeditions by the 1st and 2nd

³⁵ See Charles B. Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001).

³⁶ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 494-510; see also Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007); David Williams, *I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

South Carolina Colored Regiments.³⁷ Henry Houston, along with his wife Priscilla and daughter Anna, escaped slavery from the Houston Plantation on Talbot Island and made their way to the federal refugee camp in the port city of Fernandina. On June 13, 1863, Henry Houston stood in line to enlist in the United States Army in Fernandina, Florida. Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation six months earlier, and all-Black regiments had begun to demonstrate their capabilities as soldiers by undertaking successful expeditions up the St. Marys and St. Johns Rivers.³⁸

Approaching the enlistment officer, Colonel Milton S. Littlefield, who recorded demographic information about Houston, such as he was 30 years old, born on Talbot Island, Florida, and had worked as a “farmer” before the war.³⁹ Additionally, Littlefield noted that Houston had a brown complexion, black eyes, and black hair. Houston received a uniform, canteen, and other military supplies after a medical examination to assess his health and suitability for service. While all soldiers went through a similar medical examination, Black soldiers like Houston had to contend with potentially inexperienced physicians or medical personnel due to a lack of qualified doctors and a reluctance from many white doctors to work with Black regiments. Even those qualified physicians who performed the exams on these Black men did so with inaccurate stereotypical beliefs about the Black body that had been promulgated in the medical

³⁷ These two regiments would later be designated as the 33rd and 34th USCI regiments in 1864. This change came as a result of the military restructuring and the establishment of the United States Colored Troops. The name came as a disappointment to the men of the regiment, and therefore, out of respect for their identification with the original designations and for consistency, the regiments will be referred to as the 1st and 2nd South Carolina Regiments throughout the narrative. See Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 264

³⁸ Stephen V. Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments That Changed the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³⁹ The listed occupation for newly free men like Houston can be deceiving. As many, like Houston, had lived and worked as enslaved laborers before their enlistment, enlisting officers typically would note the occupation as “laborer,” “field hand,” or “farmer,” when the person had previously been an enslaved laborer.

community at the time.⁴⁰ With that, Houston officially enlisted in the United States Army. While he expected his life to continue to undergo dramatic changes, he had little idea what the next three years held. He could only speculate about the possible battles ahead or the dangers he might face. He likely also wondered how his wife and daughter would cope with his absence and whether they would survive in the Fernandina “contraband” camp.⁴¹ Would he make it back to see them again? Would he and his new regiment succeed in helping to defeat the Confederacy and bring an end to slavery? These questions, among many others, certainly ran through Henry's mind as he joined the United States Army in the war that would forever change the nation and his role within it. Henry's account offers a deeply personal example of how the war affected the lives of Black Americans and how his actions played a small yet crucial part in transforming a conflict that started as a struggle to preserve the republic into a fight for Black emancipation and freedom.⁴²

⁴⁰ For further discussion about the discrimination and racism faced by Black soldiers in the United States Army during the Civil War see Margaret Humphreys, *Intensely Human: The Health of the Black Soldier in the American Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Todd L. Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).

⁴¹ The terms “Contraband” and “Contraband Camp” were terms used during the war and came as a result of General Benjamin Butler's Contraband Policy, wherein he used the Confederate logic and viewpoint of these enslaved Black men and women as their property against them by stating that under the rules of war, the U.S. military could confiscate any “property” used for war purposes, including Black people. “Contraband” referred to formerly enslaved individuals who reached the lines of the United States military. “Contraband Camp” referred to the camps where these formerly enslaved individuals lived during the war that the U.S. military managed. While contraband served as the common term for formerly enslaved people during the war, in this work, contrabands will be referred to as “refugees” and “contraband camps” as “refugee camps.”

⁴² Compiled service record, Henry Houston, Private, Company A, 21st Regiment USCI; Carded Records Showing Military Service of Soldiers Who Fought in Volunteer Organizations During the American Civil War, compiled 1890-1912, documenting the period 1861-1866, Record Group 94, Roll 0025, National Archives, Washington, D.C., hereafter referred to as CMSR; When referencing a specific individual, name, rank, company, and regiment will be included. When using collective information of Black soldiers from Northeast Florida in the compiled military service records, CMSR will be used. A database of soldiers serving from Northeast Florida was created using muster rolls, pension cards, and references of soldiers from Florida in other sources. I created a spreadsheet that drew from these sources and the Compiled Military Service Records to track demographic and military service data. When drawing from

The stories of Black soldiers, like Houston, who enlisted and served in the United States Army during the Civil War, reframe the general narrative of the Civil War and highlight the impact of the decisions and actions of Black individuals. Although enlisting in the army may initially seem mundane and straightforward, it arose from a complex process simultaneously unfolding on the South Atlantic coast, Washington, D.C., and other areas of the war. For many Black leaders and abolitionists, enlistment represented the culmination of their efforts to overturn racially discriminatory laws and pervasive racial stereotypes. The image of Black soldiers for white southerners became their worst nightmare, as these men embodied an ever-present fear of a mass enslaved revolt that would violently destroy slavery and the “southern way of life”. Identifying the moments when the actions of Black free and enslaved individuals transformed United States military policy regarding emancipation and enlistment brings new appreciation for the vital role of their agency, accurately acknowledging them as proactive agents in history. Rather than merely answering the call of a country in need, their stories demonstrate that they actively and willingly engaged in a large-scale enslaved revolt that compelled the United States government to confront the fundamental moral issues at the root of this conflict.⁴³

this collective data, CMSR of soldiers from Northeast Florida will be used. Henry Houston, Private, Company A, 21st USCI; Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15; National Archives, Washington, D.C. For further discussion about the change in the goal of the war for President Abraham Lincoln and the United States see Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

⁴³ For further discussion on the Civil War framed as a mass enslaved revolt see W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998); Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

In the eyes of an individual like Houston, enlistment in the army followed a strenuous physical journey of emancipation that occurred against the backdrop of debates over the United States' stance on emancipation. The circumstances of that journey varied widely, and often, emancipation happened in stages. Like Houston, for many, this wartime odyssey also included time spent in one of the many federal refugee camps, or "contraband camps," that existed along the Atlantic coast. Much like their emancipation from slavery, the actions of enslaved individuals drove the Federals into creating these camps. The existence of these camps illustrated an evolution of federal emancipation policy and attitudes. Although physically and politically distanced from the debates in the federal capital, the proactive actions of these men and women compelled government and military officials to implement significant policy changes and address issues surrounding slavery and emancipation that many had hoped to avoid, specifically, whether the abolition of slavery would become an overt objective of the war and how to integrate the formerly enslaved into American society. Unique to the region of Northeast Florida, these actions forced the United States Navy, in particular, to dramatically change policy and become an inadvertent conduit of freedom. For these men, the physical transition led them to new places and environments where they clung to a precarious freedom with considerable limitations. Although they had managed to liberate themselves from slavery, their social and political status remained contested and, in many respects, limited by the nation's prevailing white supremacist attitudes.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ For other works that utilize similar methods of focusing on individual accounts to tell larger stories, see Kathleen DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 2015); Amy Murrell Taylor, *Embattled Freedom: Journeys through the Civil War's Slave Refugee Camps* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge,

While the service of Henry Houston and many others in the United States military began that summer in 1863, the debate and process through which Black men managed to fight in the Civil War started with the founding of the United States during the Revolutionary War. At that time, Black men and women joined white colonists in seeking liberty and freedom. Crispus Attucks, a Black man living in Boston, became an early martyr to the cause when British soldiers killed him and four other colonists in the Boston Massacre. Throughout the ensuing war between the colonies and Great Britain, Black men fought with the Continental Army despite an attempt by General George Washington to prohibit their service. These Black soldiers, except for an all-Black Rhode Island regiment, served in integrated units. After winning the war and gaining independence, Congress passed laws barring Blacks from future service in the army despite their honorable service and contributions. These federal laws remained in force throughout the early Republic and Antebellum years. During these eras, the United States fought in two major wars: the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War. Black men could not join the United States Army during the War of 1812, except in the case of several states that authorized the formation of Black regiments, such as New York and General Andrew Jackson in New Orleans. In the country's war against Mexico, the few Black men who participated did so unofficially or as servants to military officers. Therefore, by the time of the Civil War, Blacks Americans remained excluded from Army service due to federal law and pervasive racial attitudes.⁴⁵

MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

⁴⁵ Bob Luke and John David Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom: How the Union Army Recruited, Trained, and Deployed the U.S. Colored Troops* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 6-7. The Militia Act of 1792 only allowed for the enlistment of a "free able-bodied white male citizen". This law remained in effect up to the American Civil War; see also Joseph T. Wilson, *The Black Phalanx: A History of the Negro Soldiers of the United States in the Wars of 1775–1812, 1861–65* (Hartford, CT: American

After Confederates fired the first shots at Fort Sumter in 1861, few in the North viewed this conflict as a fight to abolish slavery. For most of the Northern public, government officials, President Lincoln, his administration, and military leaders, the reason for waging war against the Confederacy centered on the illegality of secession and the desire to preserve the Union. As Lincoln stated in a letter to the prominent newspaper editor Horace Greeley, "my paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it."⁴⁶ On its face, this statement seems somewhat contradictory, given Lincoln's history of disdain for slavery and his position as head of the Republican Party, a political party founded in part on abolitionist goals. However, considering the political concerns he faced in attempting to garner popular support for the war, particularly in Border States where slavery still existed, Lincoln's wartime focus on preserving the Union appeared rooted in practical concerns. Moreover, the fact that Lincoln wrote to Greeley, the founder and editor of the *New York Tribune*, raises questions about how much his statement reflected his innermost thoughts. This practical policy marginalized the hopes for emancipation and a desire to take an active part in the conflict from Blacks, both enslaved and free.⁴⁷

Publishing Company, 1888); Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Michael L. Lanning, *African Americans in the Revolutionary War* (New York: Citadel Press/Kensington, 2021) for a history of Black soldiers during early American History and the American Revolution.

⁴⁶ The American Presidency Project, "Letter in Reply to Horace Greeley. Slavery and the Union: 'The Restoration of the Union, the Paramount Object,'" August 22, 1862, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/letter-reply-horace-greeley-slavery-and-the-union-the-restoration-the-union-the-paramount>.

⁴⁷ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*; William C. Harris, *Lincoln and the Border States: Preserving the Union* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

Despite initial opposition to abolition in the United States government and a desire to keep the conflict a white man's war, many Black Americans recognized the potential for this conflict to destroy slavery in America. Aware of this opportunity, many began to act with determination. Almost as soon as Fort Sumter fell, Black men in the North volunteered to serve in the United States Army. As one Boston man argued, if given the chance, "there was not a man who would not leap for his knapsack and musket and they would make it intolerable hot for old Virginia."⁴⁸ Although separated by geographic distance and living under slavery, many Blacks in the South similarly understood how Lincoln's election and the war could transform their lives. As Corporal Prince Lambkin, born into slavery in Savannah, Georgia, later recounted before a group of Black soldiers, "the secret anxiety of the slaves in Florida to know about the President Lincoln's election, and told how they all refused to work on the fourth of March, expecting their freedom to date from that day."⁴⁹ While military necessity and a desire to keep border states, like Kentucky, in the Union constrained the abolitionist movements of Lincoln and his administration, many Black Americans, like Prince, maintained a clear vision of what lay at the root of this conflict. That clear vision of hope quickly inspired numerous Black men and women to take matters into their own hands by escaping from the plantations or Confederate camps and risking their lives to reach a United States Army encampment or naval vessel. Unfortunately, Lincoln and the United States government's decision to sidestep the issue of slavery in hopes of gaining border state

⁴⁸ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 3.

⁴⁹ Higginson, *Life in a Black Regiment*, 23.

support for maintaining the Union thwarted many of these early attempts to enlist in the service or escape from slavery.⁵⁰

In the first months of the war, United States commanders across the country had no official guidance on how to handle the enslaved men and women who sought freedom by entering an army camp or boarding a naval vessel. Some U.S. officers adhered to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, as that continued to remain the law of the land and forced Black men and women to return to their enslavers. In May of 1861, the actions of three enslaved men, along with the cunning of U.S. General Benjamin Butler, compelled the U.S. government and military to clarify their position and reshape the military's relationship with emancipation. At that time, Butler commanded the U.S. forces stationed at Fortress Monroe on Chesapeake Bay in Virginia. One night, three enslaved individuals, Frank Baker, Shepard Mallory, and James Townsend, escaped their enslaver, Confederate Colonel Charles K. Mallory, and sought refuge at Fort Monroe. The following day, a Confederate Major arrived at the fort and demanded that the three men return under the authority of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. Although a pro-slavery advocate before the war in his career as a lawyer and politician, Butler used his legal expertise to expose a loophole in the Major's claim for the men. He shrewdly informed the Major that he had no legal obligation to a foreign country, which the Confederacy

⁵⁰ For further discussion on Black Emancipation see Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007); Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Blacks Felt and Acted During the War for the Union* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965); Thavolia Glymph, *The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet*.

had claimed to have become by secession. Moreover, as the Confederates considered these men to be property and used them for military purposes, Butler claimed he had the full right to "detain" the three men as "contrabands" of war. Instead of returning them to their enslaver, Butler then employed these men to work for the Union Army, paying them to build a bakery. A major moment for these men as they became paid laborers and set the precedent for other United States officers as more and more formerly enslaved Blacks continued to seek freedom by entering the lines of the U.S. military.⁵¹

The combined actions of these four men resulted in a seismic shift in United States policy. Lincoln expressed his approval of what would become known as Butler's "Contraband Policy," in a letter to Butler from Secretary of War Simon Cameron. Identifying self-emancipated individuals and those emancipated by the U.S. military as "contraband" allowed the U.S. military and government to engage in emancipation without seriously alienating border states, to retain and employ these men and women, and significantly to undercut the Confederate labor supply. The next day, fifty-nine more "contrabands" self-emancipated and arrived at Fortress Monroe. In the coming days and weeks, hundreds more followed. In recognition of the reality on the ground, Congress began codifying Butler's policy in August 1861 by passing the First Confiscation Act. The act declared all Confederate property, including enslaved individuals, subject to capture by the U.S. military. The act did not, however, provide

⁵¹ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*; 4; Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 15; National Park Service, "Fort Monroe and the Contrabands of War," *NPS.gov*, last updated April 10, 2015, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/fort-monroe-and-the-contrabands-of-war.htm>; Elizabeth D. Leonard, *Benjamin Franklin Butler: A Noisy, Fearless Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022); James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1863* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014). Important to note that Lincoln refused to recognize the legitimacy and independence of the Confederate government.

any clarification or guidance as to the technical legal status of those formerly enslaved people. While this policy alteration necessitated the actions of U.S. officers and Congress, such actions resulted directly from a mass groundswell of resistance through self-emancipation by Black men and women whose actions pressed for these policy changes. As pointed out by Black historian W.E.B. Du Bois, "with perplexed and laggard steps, the United States government followed the footsteps of the black slave." The actions of these self-emancipating individuals and the adoption of the "contraband" policy by the United States military would have far-reaching ramifications, as it brought about changes in the emancipation process, led to the creation of federal "contraband camps" across the country, and catalyzed the recruitment of Black soldiers.⁵²

With the enactment of the First Confiscation Act, the process of emancipation for thousands of enslaved individuals changed dramatically. They effectively only needed to reach U.S. military lines to free themselves from slavery. In an area like Northeast Florida, those military lines became the many U.S. naval vessels traveling along the coast or up rivers or the naval outposts at places like Port Royal, South Carolina, and Fernandina. Under this new arrangement, the U.S. military became a primary mechanism of emancipation. At times, the military took deliberate action to assist in the emancipation efforts of enslaved individuals. More commonly, however, the proactive actions of those in bondage embarking on a physical journey of emancipation led the U.S. military to become an unintentional vehicle of freedom.⁵³

⁵² Benjamin F. Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler During the Period of the Civil War*, vol. 1 (Norwood, MA: The Plimpton Press, 1917), 119; Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 4; U.S. Congress, *An Act to Confiscate Property Used for Insurrectionary Purposes*, Public Law 37-60, U.S. Statutes at Large 12 (1861): 319–320; W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 89.

⁵³ Williams, *I Freed Myself*, 73-81; Daniel L. Schafer, *Thunder on the River: The Civil War in Northeast Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010).

During the fall of 1862, February Christopher stood on the banks of the St. Johns River, near where it emptied into the Atlantic Ocean. Christopher had lived his entire life enslaved on the Christopher Plantation on the small coastal island named Talbot Island, near Jacksonville, Florida. In September 1862, U.S. forces had mounted an expedition up the St. Johns where they successfully captured Confederate artillery batteries on St. Johns Bluff and occupied Jacksonville. As one of the ships, the *USS Paul Jones*, sat at the mouth of the river attempting to navigate the ever-changing sandbars, February likely watched from a nearby shore. Seizing the opportunity to escape slavery, February potentially used a dugout canoe to paddle out to the ship and board it. The ship's captain welcomed February aboard and allowed him to work for them for four months.⁵⁴

When February emancipated himself by boarding the *USS Paul Jones*, he, in a sense, compelled the ship, its commander, and its crew to participate in his emancipation. The *Paul Jones* likely did not have explicit orders to patrol the St. Johns River or Northeast Florida coast seeking to free enslaved individuals, but rather to patrol the area looking for Confederate blockade runners. February's decision to climb aboard the ship demonstrates the necessity of his agency for emancipation. Had February passively waited for U.S. military personnel to come and free him, he would likely have remained enslaved for months or years longer. Instead, at a time when February had no

⁵⁴ February Francis, Corporal, Company K, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C. February Christopher would go on to join the United States Army during the war under the name February Francis. After the war, he would change his name again, this time to February Shaw. Given his use of multiple last names throughout his life, he will be referred to as "February" throughout the rest of the paper to avoid confusion. There is some discrepancy regarding the timing of February's self-emancipation. According to his pension records, February boarded the *USS Paul Jones* in 1861. However, given that the ship was commissioned in the summer of 1862, it is more likely that February's escape from enslavement came in the fall of 1862. For the logbooks of the *USS Paul Jones* see U.S.S. *Paul Jones* logbook, June 9, 1862, to April 30, 1863, "Logbooks of the U.S. Navy Ships and Stations, 1801-1946," Record Group 24, Entry 119, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

legal or political rights, he effectively commandeered a U.S. naval vessel to serve his war objectives. Like the three Black men who crossed into U.S. Army lines at Fort Monroe, February forced the U.S. military and government to continue confronting the underlying issues of slavery and emancipation and to maintain the policy changes it enacted the year prior.⁵⁵

Often most emancipation accounts, like February's, lack many details, however, the story of Cato Waring provides details representative of many emancipation journeys, particularly in Northeast Florida. At the start of the war Waring, like February, had been enslaved his entire life near Charleston, South Carolina. Waring had heard the Confederate cannons fire on Fort Sumter, despite his enslaver not speaking of the coming war, he and his fellow enslaved individuals felt that their time for "deliverance had come." Waiting for that deliverance, Waring asked his enslaver "what all dat tunder mean way off dar?"⁵⁶ To which the enslaver told him, "oh it's the d—d Yankees who want to steal all our property." Feigning anger at the Yankees, Waring reassured his enslaved that he would stand by him. Waring continued to wait for his "deliverance" from enslavement as the conditions for him and his fellow enslaved individuals grew worse. His enslaver compelled Waring to require increasingly onerous tasks of the enslaved individuals under his charge. Before long, the weight of the situation grew so much that Waring dared to tell his enslaver. Frustrated, the enslaver swore and ordered Waring to come back to him for chastisement. This proved to be the last straw for

⁵⁵ February Francis, Corporal, Company K, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Williams, *I Freed Myself*; Schafer, *Thunder on the River*.

⁵⁶ Seth Rogers, M.D., "War-Time Letters From Seth Rogers, M.D., Surgeon of the First South Carolina, Afterwards the Thirty-third U.S.C.T., 1862–1863," *Florida History Online*, University of North Florida, accessed June 13, 2025, (<https://history.domains.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/projects-proj-b-p-html/cir-index-htm/war-time-letters-from-seth-rogers/>), February 13, 1863.

Waring, as in that moment he decided that he would no longer wait for his deliverance but rather take his desire and hope for freedom into his own hands. As he returned to his hut, he left out the keys where his wife could find them, and fearing that she would raise a “hullaboo” about his decision, decided not to tell her. The next morning, “befo’ de hen git up,” Waring had already left the plantation and made his way to freedom through the rice fields using a dug-out canoe. To evade the dogs used by enslavers to track escaped individuals, Waring spent the initial few days traveling on the water. Upon unexpectedly encountering a white lady, he used his quick thinking to craft a plausible story that earned him something to eat, his first meal in three days.⁵⁷

As Waring continued his journey to find the safety of United States military lines, he had to exercise extreme caution, even when encountering fellow Black men. On one occasion, he came across a Black man outside his hut. Waring almost decided to trust him enough to approach and ask for food but “thought it safer to wait and try to steal something.” As he attempted to steal some food, a dog attacked him but only caught Waring’s clothing in its mouth. The dog’s noise forced Waring to seek safety again by finding a pond and wading half the night. During another incident, while Waring traveled some 22 miles from the river, a Black horseman approached Waring and informed him that a Yankee gunboat “was commin’ up de ribber, an’ de Cap’n was holdin’ out his arms an’ beck’nin’ de niggahs fus’ from one sho’an’den from de odder.”⁵⁸ Unbeknownst to Waring at the time, this Black horseman collaborated with a group of rebels to lure him

⁵⁷ Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863. Rogers’ account is a combination of his words and him directly quoting Cato Waring. Although this escape occurred in South Carolina, many aspects of this experience likely related significantly to the experiences of self-emancipating individuals in Northeast Florida. United States officers, like Rogers and Higginson, would frequently quote their men attempting to reflect their dialect. In order to maintain historical accuracy and limit author intrusion, quotes drawn from these sources will reflect the attempt by white officers to portray the dialect.

⁵⁸ Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863.

into a trap, a fact he learned later. Fortunately, Waring got confused by the many roads in the area and arrived safely at a different point on the river. Not all encounters with other Black people on his path ended poorly. He found shelter, food, and rest under the roof of a Black person "whom he could trust."⁵⁹

After about a month and a half's journey, Cato finally saw a gunboat on the river. However, he maintained a high level of apprehension because he had little knowledge of whether the ship was friendly or if the captain of the U.S. vessel would allow him aboard or return him to his enslaver. Unsure whether to hold up a white rag, Waring ultimately raised the makeshift white flag, and the sailors spotted him on the little boat he had confiscated. "De mo'de boat come, de mo' I draw back, but oh, wen I get on de boat I thought I was in hebben."⁶⁰

Waring's harrowing emancipation journey highlights the challenges and experiences many enslaved individuals faced in seeking their own freedom. The first step of that journey came in the decision to leave the plantation and pursue liberty. For many enslaved people in the Antebellum South, freedom could mean reaching the Northern United States or Canada, or escaping to the swamps and isolated maroon communities of formerly enslaved individuals in places like Florida. However, as Waring noted upon hearing the guns fire upon Fort Sumter, the path to freedom had shifted, making liberty seem much closer. While the start of the Civil War did not yet prompt Waring to escape, it stirred the hopes and dreams he had kept hidden up to that point. As the formerly enslaved and later renowned abolitionist and author Austin Steward expressed in his memoir, "the more slaves knew about freedom, the more we desired it,

⁵⁹ Rogers, "War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers," February 13, 1863.

⁶⁰ Rogers, "War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers," February 13, 1863.

and the less willing we were to remain in bondage.”⁶¹ What ultimately led an enslaved person to make the fateful decision to self-emancipate varied among individuals. The spark that ignited that desire for freedom could come from sermons they heard, witnessing their enslavers’ celebration of the 4th of July, a wish to reunite with family, or when the threat or infliction of punishments became too severe, to the point where the enslaved person’s “desire for freedom was eventually translated into action.”⁶² Waring presents an interesting case because, although the threat of punishment preceded his decision to escape, that threat arose from his enslavers’ frustration with Waring expressing his concern about the harsh treatment the enslaver forced Waring to inflict on the other enslaved people on the plantation. This serves as a powerful reminder that the trauma from physical violence and mistreatment under slavery affects not only those who endured lashes and extra hours of hard labor but also others involved. Waring experienced emotional and psychological harm when his enslaver forced him to lash or overwork his fellow enslaved people. That trauma and mistreatment, combined with the outbreak of the war, provided Waring with the motivation to begin his journey toward emancipation.⁶³

The decision to escape the plantation did not necessarily equate to a trek towards freedom. Enslaved individuals, especially those living in the Deep South, throughout the antebellum era were well aware of the nearly impossible task of reaching

⁶¹ Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman* (Rochester, NY: William Alling, 1857) quoted in John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 107.

⁶² Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 108.

⁶³ Seth Rogers, “War-Time Letters From Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863; Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 105-108.

the freedom they desired. Therefore, enslaved individuals would, at times, abscond from the plantation but not attempt to travel to the North as a sign of resistance. Historical accounts provide examples of enslaved individuals leaving the plantation and returning sometime later of their own free will, otherwise known as truancy or absenteeism. At other times, the person would remain in hiding near the plantation, typically to stay close to family. Many times, the enslaved would have clearly logical reasons for returning or staying close. Seeking freedom often meant leaving behind one's home, family, and kinfolk. It meant facing incredible uncertainty, hunger, and the very real possibility of capture or death. The possibility of capture, in particular, could lead to further consequences, such as being sold to another enslaver, forcible separation from one's wife or family, imprisonment in stocks, public displays of mockery, lashing, whipping or worse. As another formerly enslaved man, William Green, wrote, "it requires all the nerve and energy that a poor slave can bring to his support to enable him to make up his mind to leave in this precarious manner."⁶⁴ Waring references this when he expressed concern over how his wife would react. His remarks demonstrate his understanding of the external effects of his decision. Historian Fields-Black describes a similar potential thought process in her description of Harriet Tubman's escape and how Tubman had wanted to tell her family of her escape "in case she never saw them again, but that was risky."⁶⁵ Moreover, as Fields-Black notes, "for enslaved people, running away was always a heartbreaking decision...they left behind family members," many of whom would likely suffer the repercussions.⁶⁶ Understanding these

⁶⁴ William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green, (Formerly a Slave.) Written by Himself* (Springfield, MA: L. Pratt, 1853) quoted in Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 111.

⁶⁵ Fields-Black, *Combee*, 94.

⁶⁶ Fields-Black, *Combee*, 92

factors illustrates the magnitude and stakes of the decision of Cato, and any enslaved individual, to escape slavery.⁶⁷

In deciding to leave the plantation, Waring took a further act of resistance by stealing a dugout canoe for his journey. He did not specify whose canoe he stole, but the fact that he did so as part of his self-emancipation shows how theft could serve as both a means of survival and a form of resistance. Historians have debated about the commonality of theft on antebellum plantations, the different perspectives enslaved people had when committing theft, and the survival or political reasons behind their actions. Generally, these historians suggest that theft by enslaved individuals regularly occurred on plantations and that these acts represent an “active” and “day-to-day resistance” to slavery. Whether these acts came as conscious political statements or practical acts of survival depends on individual accounts, but overall, they provide evidence of enslaved people asserting their agency within an institution determined to strip it away. According to Rogers’ account, Waring does not describe or interpret his theft of a dugout canoe as an overt act of resistance but instead as a survival tactic in his water route to freedom. Because the account is secondhand, the absence of an explicit political motive does not mean Waring lacked larger reasons for stealing his vessel of emancipation. Ultimately, Waring’s cumulative act of resistance links his actions to many incidents of rebellion by him and other enslaved individuals, highlighting the broader importance of a seemingly trivial detail and further demonstrating the many ways Waring claimed his agency.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Seth Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863; Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 111; Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 36.

⁶⁸ Seth Rogers, “War-Time Letters From Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863; Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 107; Helen Tunnicliff Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the*

After his initial decision to escape the plantation, Waring described how he navigated through a rice swamp in a dugout canoe and spent the next few days traveling mostly on water. In the coastal regions of the South Atlantic, such as South Carolina and Northeast Florida, water plays a key role in the area's landscape. The hundreds of Sea Islands that stretch along the Atlantic coast from South Carolina to Florida form a natural barrier for rivers and streams flowing into the ocean. These barrier islands, in turn, create wide salt marshes filled with cordgrasses and spartina, areas of dense mangroves, freshwater swamps with thick vegetation, and creeks and tidal channels that ebb and flow with the tides. Behind the barrier islands lay a network of creeks and rivers that allowed movement north and south without entering the Atlantic Ocean. While the numerous islands and thick plant life offered cover for enslaved people, they also brought significant dangers like disease, mosquitoes, alligators, venomous snakes, and other dangerous animals or insects carrying disease. Those seeking freedom often had to navigate, many times successfully, these treacherous landscapes and murky waters using an in-depth understanding of the geography gained through personal experience and shared knowledge among kinfolk on the plantation. Especially in this South Atlantic coastal region, enslaved populations lived in isolated environments with a majority Black population and often absentee enslavers, which made it easier for them to create “rival geographies” and provided

Negro, 5 vols. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1926–1937); Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

many avenues for escape. As Waring began his journey toward emancipation, he likely did so aware of the dangers that nature and geography presented.⁶⁹

Moreover, Waring pointed out that he risked using a water route to escape the dogs employed by enslavers to track enslaved people. The dogs' sharp sense of smell and training made them effective trackers, and their use in tracking humans went back to the Spanish Conquistadors during their conquest of the Aztecs. The reputation of these so-called "Cuban bloodhounds" grew among the European powers trying to establish colonies in the Americas, especially in Caribbean Islands like Haiti and Jamaica, where enslavers frequently used them to "hunt" for enslaved individuals who had ran away from the plantation. Although many British dismissed such methods, the use of "Cuban bloodhounds" became common in the American South after the Second Seminole War in Florida, when U.S. Army officials imported many of the breed to help track and combat Seminole Natives and their Black allies. Their importation and use in the conflict sparked a nationwide controversy as abolitionists used the canines in their rhetoric and imagery to depict the violence of slavery. Abolitionists nationwide recounted stories of dogs violently attacking freedom seekers in newspapers, and even politicians debated the animals in Congress halls. Many argued that using these Cuban bloodhounds provided additional evidence of the brutal violence and dehumanizing effects of slavery.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 6-7; Fields-Black, *Combee*, 14; William S. Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 61; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 48, 75; Robert M. Browning Jr., *Success Is All That Was Expected: The South Atlantic Blockading Squadron During the Civil War* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2002), 8; David Silkenat, *Scars on the Land: An Environmental History of Slavery in the American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁷⁰ James F. Campbell, "The Seminoles, the 'Bloodhound War,' and Abolitionism, 1796–1865," *Journal of American Studies* 40, no. 3 (2006): 533–559. Other works that discuss the role of dogs in slavery include

The physical and psychological trauma caused by these animals inflicted lasting harm on many Blacks, even after they had gained emancipation. For one soldier, Corporal Robert Sutton from Nassau County, Florida, that trauma showed itself during a midnight raid on the St. Marys River in 1863, as the yelping and barking of dogs continued to make him uneasy. Later during his escape, a dog attacked Waring. The dog “caught him by the chest, but fortunately, got only his clothing in his mouth.”⁷¹ Using a hickory cane to silence the animal, Waring managed to escape further injury. Waring’s conscious decision to avoid detection and violence in the face of these dogs, along with his fortunate escape from an attack by one, unknowingly connected him to a broader and multi-decade debate about the animal and its role in violence slavery.

Along with the threat of dogs, freedom-seekers like Waring also had to contend with slave patrols, Confederate troops, and seemingly average people, both white and black, who could thwart their attempt at self-emancipation. Three days into his escape, Waring unexpectedly came into contact with a white lady. Upon meeting this lady, Waring adopted a “nonchalance” attitude and concocted a story to maintain his cover and get something to eat.⁷² This change in attitude and story seemed to do the trick as not only did the white lady not sound the alarm, but he managed to get some food from her. Having gone three days without food at this point, Waring demonstrated

Bill L. Smith, “Open Jaws of This Monster-Tyranny: Abolitionism, Resistance, and Slave-Hunting Canines,” *International Review of Scottish Studies* 47 (2022): 1–27; C. Broeg, “Killing Butler’s Bloodhounds: An Act of Political Violence,” *Annals of Iowa* 78, no. 4 (2019): 367–392; Christopher M. Blakely, “Historicizing the ‘Beast-Man’: On Slavery and Human–Animal Relations,” *Animal History* 1, no. 1 (2024): 33–61; Tyler D. Parry, Charlton W. Yingling, “Slave Hounds and Abolition in the Americas,” *Past & Present* 246, no. 1 (2020).

⁷¹ Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863.

⁷² Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863. In his retelling of this story to Dr. Rogers, who subsequently wrote it down in his journal, not further details are given of what the story Waring made up entailed.

remarkable composure and quick thinking, as he had no way of knowing who this lady was, if she would help him, or raise an alarm.

Historians throughout the years have researched the ability of enslaved individuals to present as docile, childlike, or loyal. Stanley Elkins posited the theory that the brutal suppression of slavery had produced a childlike, dependent, and submissive personality type in enslaved individuals, commonly known as the “Sambo” stereotype. This stereotype also carried with it connotations of paternalism wherein the enslaved person, “viewed his master as his father and identified with his interest.”⁷³ Over time, however, historians like Blassingame and Genovese corrected Elkin’s oversight of the enslaved’s agency. They demonstrated that enslaved individuals adopted such personalities or attitudes as an outward performance and survival mechanism, while maintaining their inner resistance. Waring demonstrated as much to his enslaver when he reacted with indignation at the sound of U.S. cannon fire and promised to remain loyal to his master. Clearly, Waring harbored a desire to resist, yearned for freedom, and acted in a manner that reassured his enslaver. This ability to assume different personalities in the face of white authority carried over into many of these men’s military experiences. Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson observed such dramatic changes in demeanor on multiple occasions during the first few months of drill and training for the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment.⁷⁴

⁷³ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 114.

⁷⁴ Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863; Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*; Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 114-115; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 11.

The fact that he encountered a woman did not change his feelings of apprehension, for he had seen instances of physical and emotional violence committed by his enslavers. He noted that while Dr. Waring “was a bad man, but not so bad as his wife.”⁷⁵ Mrs. Waring required enslaved individuals to clean the entire house before sunrise and inspected each piece of furniture with a white handkerchief. When she found dust, she would select one of two enslaved individuals for punishment by lashing. She would also, in front of visitors, “would wind a towel around the end of a stick and have it thrust into the throat of the victim...thus the screams of the tortured would be smothered.”⁷⁶ While many early Southern historians aimed to portray the plantation mistress as a symbol of genteel femininity only passively involved in the violence of slavery, historical research confirms Waring’s account by illustrating the involvement of women in slavery. Considering his prior experience, Waring’s discomfort around this white lady seems completely understandable.⁷⁷

Four days later, Waring came upon a “black man nailing up a coonskin” and almost trusted “him enough to go up and ask for food, but finally thought it safer to wait a little and try to steal something.”⁷⁸ Waring’s conclusion that it would be safer to steal rather than ask the Black man presents a curious paradox. It suggests that even when confronted with someone of his own race, whom he might naturally trust, Waring

⁷⁵ Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863.

⁷⁶ Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863.

⁷⁷ Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863; For further discussion on the role of women in the practice and violence of slavery see the following: Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁷⁸ Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863.

maintained a significant level of apprehension. The reason for this apprehension could have to do with the reality that enslavers often forced both enslaved and free Blacks to participate in slave patrols. Waring had apparently encountered or seen this practice frequently enough to realize he could not trust someone solely based on skin color. This awareness potentially saved his self-emancipation. Waring later met another Black man, “whom he could trust,” who provided him with food and shelter.⁷⁹ The account offers no details about what made him trust this man. Still, Waring’s story clearly demonstrates the caution emancipating individuals exercised during their escape.⁸⁰

Even when exercising the utmost caution, individuals seeking freedom could still fall into traps. Twenty miles from the river, Waring encountered a Black horseman who told him about the nearby U.S. gunboat with a captain welcoming Blacks onboard. Waring chose to trust this man and headed toward the river, but he took a wrong turn and did not reach the river at the intended spot. Luckily for Waring, as he later learned, that mistake “saved him from a trap of the rebels for whom the black horseman was acting.”⁸¹ Waring did not know whether this man, the Black horseman, acted willingly or under duress. However, historical evidence indicates that, in such situations where Black men worked with slave patrols, they did so out of coercion. Waring could relate to this, having served as an overseer for sixteen years. As part of his role as overseer,

⁷⁹ Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863.

⁸⁰ Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863; For further reading on the use of Black people, free and enslaved, in slave patrols see Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Christopher Waldrep, “Discipline and Surveillance in Antebellum Slave Patrols,” *American Journal of Legal History* 31, no. 3 (1987): 241–270; John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁸¹ Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863.

Waring had the almost daily task of lashing other enslaved individuals. While performing this task, his enslaver stood behind Waring with a paddle and would knock him “for any delinquency.”⁸² Ultimately, these encounters show that when men and women escaped slavery, whether in South Carolina or Florida, they entered territory that had effectively existed as “enemy” territory before the war and now, with the war in full effect, heightened the danger of encountering Confederate troops or guerrilla units. Freedom seekers knew full well that a single interaction with anyone could lead to their re-enslavement, physical punishment, or death.⁸³

Given the dangerous environment Waring and other emancipating individuals faced, it comes as no surprise that Waring’s caution and distrust extended even when he saw what he believed to be a U.S. gunboat. Recognizing friend from foe at a distance could prove challenging and therefore Waring had to find ways to attract attention without revealing himself too much, ensuring he could escape if the gunboat proved unfriendly. Unsure but hopeful, Waring held up a “white rag” while keeping himself hidden in his small boat.⁸⁴ As the gunboat approached, Waring prepared for a possible escape by pulling his boat back. Fortunately, his plan worked, and sailors on a U.S. gunboat spotted the improvised white flag, allowing Waring to joyfully board the ship safely.⁸⁵

⁸² Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863.

⁸³ Seth Rogers, “War-Time Letters From Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863; For further reading on the use of Black people, free and enslaved, in slave patrols see Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Christopher Waldrep, “Discipline and Surveillance in Antebellum Slave Patrols,” *American Journal of Legal History* 31, no. 3 (1987): 241–270; Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*.

⁸⁴ Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863.

⁸⁵ Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers,” February 13, 1863.

Waring's account does not specify which of the many creeks and rivers along the South Carolina coast where Waring encountered the U.S. gunboat. Nor does it explain why that ship was patrolling the river, however strategy of the U.S. Navy in this region provides so important insights. By 1862, U.S. naval forces controlled various coastal outposts along the Southern Atlantic coast, including Port Royal, Beaufort, and Fernandina. The occupation of these ports functioned as part of a broader strategy in which the U.S. Navy sought to blockade all Confederate seaports. Known as the "Anaconda Plan," the U.S. Navy hoped to use its naval supremacy to cut the Confederacy off from international trade and prevent its export of cotton. The Naval Department created the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron in the fall of 1861, tasked with blockading the 500 miles of coastline from the North Carolina border of South Carolina to Cape Canaveral, Florida. With only three vessels ready for service on the Atlantic Coast when the war began and facing a difficult coastline geography littered with sea islands, narrow rivers, large estuaries, marshes, and an inland network of waterways, the Naval Department determined that "the blockade would become more effective with the capture of points along the coast."⁸⁶ Based on this strategy, the South Atlantic Blockade Squadron, under the command of Admiral Samuel Du Pont, captured the coastal ports of Port Royal and Fernandina. Despite the relative ease with which the U.S. Navy had conquered these ports, carrying out this blockade proved an onerous task and one the Navy struggled with throughout the war.

While much of the blockade duty consisted of monitoring river mouths and ports like Charleston, the Navy began to expand its blockading efforts as the number of ships

⁸⁶ Browning, *Success Is All That Was Expected*, 20.

increased and the Navy invested in shallow-draft vessels that could better navigate the inland waterways along the coast. U.S. naval vessels frequently conducted reconnaissance patrols up creeks and rivers to scout for Confederate blockade runners, enemy positions, and resources or to conduct raids. While these patrols did not have objectives of emancipating Blacks, especially during the beginning of the war, their presence on these waterways gave Black men and women like Waring the opportunity to use them as their personal means of emancipation. As the war continued and freedom seekers continued to use U.S. naval vessels as their means of freedom, they increasingly received aid in their efforts from Admiral Du Pont, whose personal views of slavery evolved during the war. This evolution led him to adopt policies by the summer of 1862 that assisted in the emancipation process; from encouraging officers to permit freedom seekers to board, not allowing enslavers to reclaim formerly enslaved people, and helping ferry formerly enslaved from their sites of emancipation to refugee camps.⁸⁷

Despite U.S. Navy assistance, these naval patrols constituted temporary incursions into Confederate territory. As a result, the battle lines between the two sides in this region became increasingly fluid and unpredictable. Even in places where U.S. forces captured Southern cities and established seemingly more permanent positions, the whims of commanders, military necessity, or the threat of Confederate forces could lead to the surprising evacuation of a given position, as seen in the case of Jacksonville, Florida, which U.S. forces conquered and evacuated three times. Each time U.S. forces

⁸⁷ Letter from Samuel Francis Du Pont to James William Augustus Nicholson, July 3, 1862, written by Samuel Francis DuPont, 1803–1865 (1862); in *Official Dispatches and Letters of Rear Admiral Du Pont, U. S. Navy. 1846–48. 1861–63* (Wilmington, DE: Ferris Brothers Press, 1883), 264; Letter from Samuel Francis Du Pont to A. T. Snell, August 7, 1862, written by Samuel Francis DuPont, 1803–1865 (1862); in *Official Dispatches and Letters of Rear Admiral Du Pont*, 320–321.

abandoned areas like this, they frequently had to leave behind Blacks who had used the occupation as their chance to self-emancipate. The abandonment of these people came as a result of callous disregard for them by U.S. officers or due to logistical realities of having to use limited ships capacity for soldiers and military equipment. For enslaved individuals like Waring, this created a great deal of uncertainty about where they needed to go to reach safety and freedom within U.S. lines. Additionally, the threat of Confederate forces, state militias, guerrilla units, or slave traders loomed large. As one U.S. naval officer told another while patrolling the St. Marys, “it will not be safe for any of your people to land...as parties of guerrillas are prowling about in every direction.”⁸⁸ While not all self-emancipating stories were identical to Waring’s, many stories of emancipation from Northeast Florida by Black people demonstrate numerous parallels.

Robert Sutton had grown up along the St. Marys River, a river that runs along the border between Georgia and Florida, in the small lumber town of Woodstock, Florida. Enslaved by the Alberti Family, Sutton had spent much of his life working as a lumberman, constructing lumber roads, and piloting ships up and down the St. Marys River. From these frequent travels along the river, Sutton gained a deep knowledge of the river and how to navigate it. Like Waring, Sutton made the decision to emancipate himself by using a dugout canoe to escape slavery and reach freedom at the federal outpost at Fernandina. Unlike Waring, Sutton received no assistance from any U.S. naval vessels during his journey to the refugee camp at Fernandina. Not wanting to leave behind his family, “I wouldn’t have leff my child,” Sutton made the unique decision to returned upriver to free the rest of his family. As Fields-Black notes, “most enslaved

⁸⁸ *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. 13 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1894–1922), 40. Hereafter referred to as *ORN*.

people who liberated themselves from chattel slavery did so with a one-way ticket.”⁸⁹

Incredibly, Sutton successfully freed his wife and child, carrying them downriver to Fernandina.⁹⁰

Sutton’s experience presents an intriguing case as his and his family’s emancipation emerged through his actions, with no recorded assistance from U.S. military personnel other than providing a refugee camp at Fernandina. This presents a different perspective on the role of the U.S. military in the journey of emancipation. While this narrative alters the perception of the U.S. military’s involvement regarding the actions of Black men during the emancipation process, they do not entirely diminish its role and contributions. Instead, it offer a nuanced understanding of the military’s role in emancipation in this region, specifically the Navy’s. This nuance demonstrates that for some, like Sutton, the U.S. Navy played a minimal role in his journey, while for others, such as February and Waring, it had a more significant part to fulfill.⁹¹

In another instance, two future soldiers, Anthony Frazier and Joseph Delk, found their way to St. Augustine after a lengthy journey of over 140 miles from Wekiwa Springs to St. Augustine, Florida. Unlike Waring and Sutton, Frazier and Delk did not face the initial threat of their enslaver upon leaving the plantation. Their Unionist enslaver, William S. Delk, had decided to flee to the coast and “told us...that we were free and to take care of ourselves.”⁹² Although technically free, Frazier, Delk, and the 17 others had to travel hundreds of miles through the heart of Florida using an old boat

⁸⁹ Fields-Black, *Combee*, 102, 108.

⁹⁰ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 63.

⁹¹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 63; Williams, *I Freed Myself*; Schafer, *Thunder on the River*; Craig L. Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals: Abraham Lincoln, the U.S. Navy, and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁹² *The Apopka Chief*, “The Weird Story of Rock Springs,” Apopka, Florida, August 29, 1900.

they found at Wekiwa Springs. Much like Waring, this intrepid group of freedom-seekers faced risks in their journey as they traveled over the Wekiva River and on to the St. Johns River. While not as populated nor teeming with Confederate troops, this group still passed through hundreds of miles of effectively enemy territory. Upon reaching the St. Johns River, they encountered a U.S. Naval vessel that took them the rest of the way to St. Augustine.⁹³

Henry McIntyre had a similar experience as Delk and Frazier. Born in North Carolina, McIntyre came to Palatka, Florida, a small town located along the banks of the St. Johns River south of Jacksonville, when his enslaver, William Dunn Mosely, moved there in 1853. As U.S. Naval vessels made their way up the St. Johns, likely in the fall of 1862, McIntyre saw his opportunity for emancipation. He went to his elderly enslaver and sought to persuade him to seek their protection. Despite being the first Governor of the State of Florida, suspicion of Mosely's Unionist sentiments by "rebels" in the area had grown. McIntyre informed Mosely that he intended to use the U.S. naval vessels to emancipate himself, his parents, and his sisters. Out of seemingly genuine concern for his enslaver, McIntyre attempted to convince Mosely to come as well. Perhaps due to his advanced age, Mosely declined but put no obstacles before McIntyre and his family, "knowing that his children would not treat them as he had done."⁹⁴ Therefore, much like Delk and Frazier, McIntyre did not face the initial threats and dangers of Waring when he decided to self-emancipate. McIntyre and his family would travel by U.S. naval ship

⁹³ *The Apopka Chief*, "The Weird Story of Rock Springs," Apopka, Florida, August 29, 1900.

⁹⁴ Rogers, "War-Time Letters From Seth Rogers," February 11, 1863. While all enslavers viewed those they enslaved as property, they did not all treat those they enslaved the same. As demonstrated in this quote, the differences in treatment could even exist within families.

to the refugee camp at Fernandina. Then McIntyre continued onward to Port Royal, South Carolina, where he enlisted in the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment.⁹⁵

When these Northeast Florida men embarked on their emancipation journey, they carried on the practice of using maritime vessels on the St. Johns River as a path towards freedom. Waterways like the St. Johns and St. Marys functioned in this way for decades by the time of the Civil War. During the Patriot War from 1812-1814, when American filibusters attempted to foment a rebellion in Spanish held East Florida with the hope of annexing the area to the United States, Anna Kingsley and her family of free Blacks relied on the St. Johns River and the Spanish gunboats patrolling it as a source of safety and protection from capture and possible re-enslavement by American paramilitary forces.⁹⁶

The common use of maritime vessels in their emancipation journey by all of these men demonstrated how U.S. Naval vessels gained increased importance as they projected U.S. military presence deeper into Confederate territory and created opportunities, both intentionally and unintentionally, for emancipation. Although each, with the exception of Sutton, traveled varying distances to reach the ship's proximity, the culminating act of this phase of their emancipation came when they boarded the U.S. vessel. While these ships and their crews did not always intentionally set out to free these enslaved people, their participation in the physical journey of emancipation in this region proved critical for many. Ironically, the U.S. Navy found much more success

⁹⁵ Rogers, "War-Time Letters From Seth Rogers," February 11, 1863; CMSR for Henry McIntyre, Company G, 33rd USCI.

⁹⁶ *The Apopka Chief*, "The Weird Story of Rock Springs," Apopka, Florida, August 29, 1900; Higginson, *Life in a Black Regiment*, 63, 84; Daniel L. Schafer, *Anna Kingsley Jai Kingsley: African Princess, Florida Slave, Plantation Slaveowner* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 40.

in assisting freedom seekers than they did in their primary objective of blockading the coast. Ultimately, the emancipation process in Northeast Florida resulted from a collaborative effort of varying degrees, combining the actions and agency of Black people with the presence and willingness of the U.S. Navy to act as vessels of freedom.⁹⁷

Simultaneous to the codification of the contraband policy under the passage of various Confiscation Acts in Congress in July of 1862, Admiral Du Pont issued a directive in response to ship captains' questions regarding the "contraband question." In a letter on July 3, 1862, Du Pont gave clear instructions that U.S. naval vessels "surrender none, no matter whether the parties asking for them profess to be loyal or not."⁹⁸ These actions, combined with the numerous rivers, swamps, and miles of coastline in the area, made the U.S. navy a valuable ally for many Blacks seeking freedom from slavery in Northeast Florida and enhanced the significance of the U.S. Naval presence for emancipation. Many Black Floridians from Jacksonville, St. Augustine, and the surrounding regions relied on U.S. Naval vessels to reach federal outposts in places like Fernandina, Florida, and Port Royal, South Carolina. Their presence, due to blockade duty or participation in expeditions, provided enslaved and free Blacks with relatively secure transportation to federal outposts and refugee camps.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Schafer, *Thunder on the River*; Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals*; Williams, *I Freed Myself*; Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867, Series I, Volume 1: The Destruction of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Marcus Rediker, *Freedom Ship: The Uncharted History of Escaping Slavery by Sea*, (New York: Viking Publishing, 2025).

⁹⁸ ORN, s. 1, v. 13, 167.

⁹⁹ Schafer, *Thunder on the River*; Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals*.

In 1862, the U.S. Navy twice dispatched expeditions up the St. Johns River that successfully occupied Jacksonville. Neither of these missions had the emancipation of enslaved individuals as the primary objective. However, Black men, women, and children, aware of the freedom these naval vessels offered, utilized these expeditions to obtain federal protection and transportation. At Jacksonville, U.S. forces found a city almost abandoned, where "grass and weeds grow rank and tall in the principal streets. Houses with blinds closed attest the absence of inmates. Stores with shelves but no goods, Churches deserted and gloomy."¹⁰⁰ In contrast to the abandoned city, the U.S. Navy encountered a near-constant flood of Black individuals boarding U.S. ships as they moved up and down the St. Johns. As the boats traveled along the St. Johns River, enslaved individuals escaped slavery on board their vessels. A family consisting of a husband, wife, and three children boarded the *U.S.S. Paul Jones* after having previously escaped slavery by boarding the *U.S.S. Patroon* first before transferring to the *Paul Jones*. On October 3, a "negro who escaped enemy lines" came aboard the *Paul Jones* by way of the *Uncas*.¹⁰¹ At one point, the *U.S.S. Hale* had 49 contrabands on board from Palatka, Florida. The commander of the *U.S.S. Isaac Smith* noted in an official report that "during this trip I received so many contrabands on board...I could not accommodate them all."¹⁰² By the time U.S. forces evacuated Jacksonville once again, U.S. naval vessels carried with them "several White refugees, and about 276 contrabands, including men, women, and children."¹⁰³ Many men from the area who

¹⁰⁰ "A Letter of Captain V. Chamberlain, 7th Connecticut Volunteers," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XV (October 1935), 93.

¹⁰¹ National Archives and Records Administration, *USS Paul Jones Ship Log, Civil War Naval Ship Logs*, RG 24: Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, 1798-1947.

¹⁰² *ORN*, s. 1, v. 13, 108.

¹⁰³ *United States War Department, The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Ser. 1, Vol. 14 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1894),

enlisted in the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment in the fall and winter of 1862 in Hilton Head, South Carolina, likely did so after using U.S. Navy ships participating in the St. Johns expedition to transport them from the Jacksonville area to the South Carolina coast.¹⁰⁴

The U.S. Navy's connection to the experience of Black people in Northeast Florida and the South Atlantic involved more than just emancipation through boarding naval vessels. As hundreds of Black men, women, and children continued to board the patrolling ships, they initiated a new symbiotic relationship with the U.S. Navy. In this relationship, the U.S. Navy provided protection, transportation, essential food and supplies, and opportunities for both official and unofficial military service. In return, Black men and women offered the Navy valuable labor, recruits, and local knowledge. In the case of February, after boarding the *U.S.S. Paul Jones*, he worked as a "messenger boy," relaying messages from the ship's captain and officers to the rest of the crew aboard the ship.¹⁰⁵ Typically, white younger men or teenagers fulfilled this role, but Black men, like February, completed such tasks as part of their unofficial service. Within a short time, February officially enlisted in the U.S. Navy and served for the next year and a half aboard several vessels, including Rear Admiral Samuel Francis DuPont's flagship, the *U.S.S. Wabash*. Others in the area had similar trajectories to February. By the war's end, more than 60 Black men from Northeast Florida had

131, hereafter referred to as *OR*; Samuel Proctor, "Jacksonville During the Civil War," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (1962), 346.

¹⁰⁴ CMSR of soldiers from Northeast Florida.

¹⁰⁵ February Francis, Corporal, Company K, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Navy Veterans Who Served During the Civil War and Later Wars, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

officially enlisted in the U.S. Navy, most likely having emancipated themselves in the process.¹⁰⁶

The process of enlisting Black sailors during the Civil War differed from that of Black soldiers. While the U.S. government had clear laws banning the recruitment and enlistment of Black men into the Army, no such laws applied to the U.S. Navy. From the Revolutionary War to the Civil War, the United States had functioned in a cycle where military and government officials attempted to keep Blacks out of the Navy during peace times, only to seek out their service during wars out of desperation for manpower. After the War of 1812, when the Navy turned to Black men to increase its numbers, it restricted the number of Black sailors to 5 percent of the enlisted force. When the Civil War began, the Navy was severely understaffed and short on ships. Struggling to compete with the Army, the Navy desperately sought men and again turned to Black men for enlistment. Additionally, as freedom seekers continued to board U.S. vessels, ship commanders requested guidance from the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles. By September 1861, Welles permitted the enlistment of formerly enslaved individuals. By the end of 1861, Black sailors made up roughly 6 percent of the crews on vessels. Approximately six months later, this percentage had more than doubled to nearly 15 percent. Much of that increase came in the U.S.-occupied regions of the South, such as Port Royal and Fernandina, and consisted mainly of formerly enslaved men. Overall, an

¹⁰⁶ February Francis, Corporal, Company K, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Navy Veterans Who Served During the Civil War and Later Wars, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C. This estimation also reflects a review of the *Soldiers and Sailors Database*, *Sailors*, National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-sailors.htm>.

estimated minimum of 18,000 Black men served aboard U.S. ships during the war in official service.¹⁰⁷

Beyond the official service of Black sailors, many served unofficially as pilots or guides. As the Navy struggled to blockade the approximately 3,000 miles of Confederate coastline, along with its hundreds of ports and river mouths, ship commanders grew to rely on Black pilots or guides. Their intimate knowledge of the rivers, coastlines, swamps, tides, and of Confederate forces would prove invaluable to the success of the U.S. Navy's operations in the area, as many ship commanders had little to no familiarity with its geography. In one instance, a U.S. naval officer reported that while transferring five formerly enslaved individuals to another ship, he decided to keep and enlist one "on account of his local knowledge."¹⁰⁸ On another occasion, during an expedition up the St. Johns in the summer of 1862, the commander of the *U.S.S. Paul Jones* learned from an "intelligent contraband" the location of the Confederate steamer *Governor Milton*.¹⁰⁹ The unnamed man had served as a pilot aboard the ship. Upon obtaining this information, U.S. forces sent the steamer *U.S.S. Darlington* and a company from the 47th Pennsylvania to successfully capture the enemy vessel.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Joseph P. Reidy, "Black Men in Navy Blue During the Civil War," *Prologue Magazine* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2001); For further reading on the role of Black Sailors in the U.S. Navy during the Civil War see David L. Valuska, *The Negro in the Union Navy, 1861–1865* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1973); Herbert Aptheker, "The Negro in the Union Navy," *Journal of Negro History* 32, no. 2 (April 1947): 163–200; and Steven J. Ramold, *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens: African Americans in the Union Navy* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002). This estimation pertains to the number of officially enlisted Black sailors. Recent scholarship by Ramold in *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens*; Barbara Brooks Tomblin, *Bluejackets and Contrabands: African Americans and the Union Navy*, (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009) has brought to light the unofficial service of Blacks in the U.S. Navy as pilots, river guides, and labor.

¹⁰⁸ *ORN*, s. 1, v. 13, 64.

¹⁰⁹ *ORN*, s. 1, v. 13, 364.

¹¹⁰ Steven J. Ramold, *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens*, 46.

The symbiotic relationship between enslaved individuals seeking freedom and the U.S. Navy extended beyond the emancipation process. This relationship also encompassed the refugee camps that the U.S. military established and managed throughout the region. Unlike other areas of the war where the U.S. Army predominantly managed these camps, the Navy administered many of the camps along the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.¹¹¹

The most significant of these camps in Northeast Florida rose at Fernandina. The location of the camp in Fernandina presented a historical irony considering the city's previous involvement in the slave trade throughout the antebellum period. Early in the war, however, Admiral DuPont recognized the strategic importance of the port as a logistical base. Its location at the mouth of the St. Marys River provided an oceanic port that could accommodate vessels with 20 foot draft at high tide and had access to the St. Marys River, a vital waterway that served as the border between Georgia and Florida. Marshes surrounded the port and Amelia Island, isolating it from the Florida mainland and simplifying its defenses. Furthermore, the Florida Railroad, completed in 1861, had a terminus that connected the city to the port city of Cedar Key on the Gulf of Mexico and to a semi-constructed fort, Fort Clinch. On July 16, 1861, DuPont sent a report to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles outlining his proposal to capture Fernandina and establish it as a naval and coaling station. Then, in February 1862, DuPont set out from Port Royal with an expeditionary force of twenty-six ships and a battalion of Marines to seize the city.¹¹²

¹¹¹ For further discussion of the relationship between Black refugees and the United States Navy see Tomblin, *Blackjackets and Contrabands*.

¹¹² *ORN*, s. 1, v. 12, 195-198; David Head, "Slave Smuggling by Foreign Privateers: The Illegal Slave Trade and the Geopolitics of the Early American Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 33, no. 3 (Fall

Although the Florida state militia had occupied Fort Clinch shortly after secession, Confederate commanders focused their attention elsewhere, leaving the fort undermanned and with outdated artillery when DuPont and his expedition arrived. U.S. forces landed on Amelia Island and quickly seized the fort and town by March 4th. The expedition received vital help and information from a freedom seeker who informed U.S. forces that the “Rebels had abandoned in haste the whole of the defenses of Fernandina, and were even retreating from Amelia Island.”¹¹³ With the U.S. Navy in control of the town and the island, enslaved Blacks from the surrounding areas began to flock to U.S. positions. As with the refugee camps in other parts of the country, the growing number of refugees compelled the Navy to establish a refugee camp in Fernandina. The Navy would later establish similar camps in Mayport Mills on the St. Johns and at St. Augustine. An 1864 federal census of the Department of the South provides a snapshot of the numbers and demographics of these camps at that moment. According to the census, federal officials marked over 1,700 individuals as “contraband” living in Fernandina, Jacksonville, or St. Augustine. However, that number is likely significantly lower than the actual number of enslaved people who escaped to these federal camps or passed through them at some point during the war as the census does not measure the movement of people through an area over a period of time. The 1,700 does not include the hundreds of men who enlisted in the various United States Colored Infantry regiments created in the Department. Moreover, the fact that census officials combined the inquiry about birthplace and contraband status in the same question likely

2013): 440; Gregg M. Turner, *A Short History of Florida Railroads* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 28-31; Browning, *Success Is All That Was Expected*, 9. 21. Important to note that the construction of the city’s railroad and Fort Clinch were largely done through enslaved labor.

¹¹³ Schafer, *Thunder on the River*, 47.

created a scenario for confusion or error, as there always exists the potential of human error from the formerly enslaved who might not have understood the question, or realized the implications of identifying oneself as a “contraband.” Additionally, federal officials may have misrecorded information or failed to locate all individuals dispersed across Amelia Island. Taking these factors into account, a more reasonable estimate places the number of people who lived in or passed through these camps at well over 2,000.¹¹⁴

At the time federal officials conducted the census, many of these refugees consisted mainly of older individuals, women, and children—often family members of Black soldiers. Prescilla Houston, wife of Henry Houston, appeared in the census with their two daughters, Angeline and Sophia. Harriet Pappy, whose sons William, Frank, and Antonio each enlisted in the 4th South Carolina Colored Regiment (later renamed the 21st USCI) at Fernandina in June of 1863, lived in the refugee camp with her other children, Domingo (age 14), Alexander (age 11), and Jane (age 9). This data provides a compelling reminder that military service not only impacted the men who enlisted but also affected the families they left behind. The census official noted the “destitute” circumstances of some individuals by name, as well as their “old” age or “feeble” nature. In this challenging situation of living in a refugee camp with the male provider of the family off fighting a war, it often fell to the matriarchs and mothers to support their

¹¹⁴ Florida State Genealogical Society, “1864 Census of the Department of the South,” (Westminster, MA: Heritage Books, 2002). The War Department ordered the census in large part to register potential voters as part of Lincoln’s 10% plan that stipulated if 10% of voters in a Confederate state took an oath of allegiance to the United States and accepted the end of slavery they could form a new state government and enter into the Union once again. The War Department likely ordered the census in hopes of bringing Florida back into the Union prior to the 1864 Presidential election in hopes of bolstering Lincoln’s support. The census asked for basic demographic information like name, height, eyes, complexion, and age. For contrabands, census officials also asked about the identity of their former owners.

families through farming, obtaining rations from the military, or seeking assistance from kinfolk. This did not necessarily create a new situation for these women, as men disproportionately faced the threat of their enslaver selling them as part of the domestic slave trade. Additionally, enslaved males more frequently escaped slavery, often leaving behind their wife and children.¹¹⁵

Although some of the men who would later enlist in the USCI from Northeast Florida escaped with their families, many sought to return to emancipate them before or during their service. Robert Sutton from Nassau County, Florida, returned to the Alberti Plantation to free his wife and child. John Quincy from Palatka, Florida and serving in the 2nd South Carolina Colored Unit, attempted to free his wife and child during a raid, an attempt that cost him his life. For many of these men, their understanding of freedom existed within the context of their families. The freedom would remain partial until all of them had escaped enslavement. This drove many men to put themselves into incredibly hazardous situations, even life-threatening, so that they could emancipate their loved ones. The collective actions of these men across the entire country led Congress, in March 1865, to pass legislation that freed the wives and children of any formerly enslaved man who served in the U.S. military.¹¹⁶

These refugee camps, such as those at Fernandina and Port Royal, emerged along U.S. military lines across the country as hundreds of thousands of men, women,

¹¹⁵ Florida State Genealogical Society, "1864 Census of the Department of the South,"; Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 138-141; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 491-492; U.S., *Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamations of the United States of America*, vol. 13 (Boston, 1866), p. 571; For further reading about the impact of the war on Black women see Thavolia Glymph, *The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

¹¹⁶ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 62-63, 70, 97-104; Stephen V. Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments That Changed the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 98. John Quincy's story will be discussed in greater detail in the future chapter.

and children sought freedom from slavery. The establishment of these camps occurred in a non-linear fashion throughout the war and varied in size and location. These camps consisted of varying numbers of formerly enslaved individuals living alongside U.S. military installations. Military and government officials, sometimes with the support of Northern philanthropic organizations, managed these camps by providing protection and occasionally offering food, supplies, shelter, and safety. Despite this bureaucratic management, camp conditions varied significantly and could dramatically change over time and space, dependent on a number of factors, including the war and the white officer in charge. Camp Nelson in Kentucky started off badly as military officials expelled women and children from the area. However, after public outcry and pressure from many in the North and Republicans in Congress, conditions at the camp improved. In Corinth, Mississippi, the refugee camp became an ideal model of organization for the management of other camps. Refugee families built cabins, began farming the land, and established schools and churches.¹¹⁷

On the opposite side of the state, the refugee camp at Natchez, Mississippi, became infamously known as “Devil’s Punchbowl” for its severe lack of shelter, food, and sanitation. While many have considered the establishment of these refugee camps as the culminating event in emancipation, recent historical research by Amy Taylor suggests that these camps functioned more as a “transition state” and further demonstrates how contingencies related to time and location could impact the experience in those camps. These camps represented a more nuanced view of emancipation and freedom, one shaped by the decisions of military commanders and

¹¹⁷ Amy Murrell Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*.

government officials. In general, their decisions represented a complex mix of racial prejudice and military necessity. As she notes, “freedom born in these circumstances would not be immediately and fully realized. It would be continually fought for and fought against, triumphant yet always under siege.”¹¹⁸ Just as escaping from the plantation served as a step in the process of emancipation, reaching and residing in these refugee camps became, for many, a visible sign of emancipation and served as yet another step toward freedom.¹¹⁹

While the U.S. Army managed a majority of these camps, the Navy established some along the coastal areas near coaling stations and ports. As with the Army camps, the Navy established some only temporarily according to military necessity, while others, like Fernandina, became permanent likely due to its importance as a coaling station and the lack of threat from Confederate forces. The naval refugee camps shared many similarities with those managed by the army; however, the navy’s camps, as Steven Ramold notes, “differed sharply from the squalid encampments established by the army.”¹²⁰ Ramold continues, these “camps were highly organized by the navy officers appointed as their caretakers.”¹²¹ However, that characterization might be relative as a correspondent from Wisconsin claimed “evidences of the neglect and bad

¹¹⁸ Amy Murrell Taylor, *Embattled Freedom: Journeys through the Civil War’s Slave Refugee Camps* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 18.

¹¹⁹ Amy Murrell Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 8; For further reading on refugee camps see Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016); Richard D. Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky: A Civil War History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002); Ronald L. F. Davis, “The Black Experience in Natchez, 1720–1880,” *The Journal of Mississippi History* 36, no. 4 (1974): 401–433; these works largely deal with refugee camps managed by the U.S. army. That camp at Fernandina is one of the few managed by the U.S. Navy.

¹²⁰ Ramold, *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens*, 45.

¹²¹ Ramold, *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens*, 46.

management of the authorities are apparent.”¹²² The Navy provided refugees with daily rations but expected them to cultivate and produce their own food, hoping to make these camps self-sufficient, even to the point where the Navy began arming many of the contrabands. Although U.S. gunboats often remained nearby, “the contrabands were their own first line of defense.”¹²³ Herein lies a vital qualifier to the symbiotic relationship these camps created between the newly free people and the U.S. Navy. While each provided the other with a vital need, the circumstances of the conflict and military necessity at times required the Navy to undertake actions or make decisions that ran contrary to the goals and well-being of the hundreds of Black refugees in the camps.

The tenuous circumstances of these refugees, resulting from questions of military necessity and their continued classification as “contrabands,” demonstrate the social and political complexities of the environment and the relationships between the two groups. While those arriving at these camps found freedom from slavery, that freedom did not equate to citizenship. The legal rationale used by General Butler relied on the continued classification of these men and women as property. As such, the freedom discovered by these men and women upon entering the refugee camps came with significant caveats; they confronted poverty, a general lack of medical care, and racism. As a reporter in the *Wood County Reporter*, “the blacks are generally abused and all their private rights ignored or infamously violated...no man can now plant even a garden safely, or raise any pigs or poultry, because of the plundering character of the soldiery and the neglect of proper discipline by the officers.”¹²⁴ A U.S. officer noted the

¹²² *Wood County Reporter* (Grand Rapids, Wisconsin), January 29, 1863, 3. There remains a need for further research in this specific area to formulate a more definitive conclusion.

¹²³ Ramold, *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens*, 48.

¹²⁴ *Wood County Reporter* (Grand Rapids, Wisconsin), January 29, 1863, 3.

conditions of some “590 destitute colored people” crammed in the few houses left standing in the city.¹²⁵ On one occasion, a detachment of Black U.S. troops led by a white officer forcibly conscripted four Black freemen working as laborers at Fort Clinch: Joseph Wanton, Jeff Houston, Sam Major, and Peter Williams. Wanton was twelve years old at the time, and the soldiers took him “from his bed and the arms and tears of his sister.”¹²⁶ Wanton and Houston would later receive discharged for improper enlistment.¹²⁷ The freedom in these refugee camps existed within a war zone where the U.S. military many times prioritized other objectives and could readily use claims of ‘military necessity’ to abandon or forcibly move refugees. Additionally, U.S. officers, government officials, and missionaries overseeing the camps held differing views on abolition and race. Underneath this complex environment replete with competing goals lay the threat of recapture and re-enslavement by Confederates and guerrilla units. As noted by David Williams, for these Black men and women, “freedom was little more than a set of possibilities surrounding a space that had to be carved out and occupied.”¹²⁸

Although complex and with caveats, Fernandina served as a beacon of freedom for many enslaved people in Northeast Florida on their physical journey to escape slavery. For older individuals, women, and children, the camp became a permanent residence for the remainder of the war, and for many, this continued into

¹²⁵ H. M. Plaisted to Charles G. Halpine, June 11, 1863, “Department of South Letters Received,” Entry 109, Box 2, RG 393, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

¹²⁶ J. R. Hawley to Charles G. Halpine, April 29, 1863, “Department of South Letters Received,” Entry 109, Box 3, RG 393, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

¹²⁷ CMSR for Joseph Wanton, Private, Company F, 33rd Regiment USCI; CMSR for Jeff Houston, Private, Company F, 33rd USCI.

¹²⁸ Williams, *I Freed Myself*, 17; Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*; additional descriptions of the conditions of Fernandina can be found in “Department of South Letters Received,” Entry 109, RG 393, Boxes 2 & 3, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

Reconstruction. Eventually, Fernandina also assumed the role of a major military recruiting station. In the summer of 1863, the U.S. Army established the 4th South Carolina Colored Regiment and designated Fernandina as the primary recruiting location. For many military-aged men who escaped slavery during 1862 and into the early part of 1863, Fernandina acted as a way station en route to Port Royal, South Carolina, where they would enlist in the first officially recognized all-Black regiment, the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment.¹²⁹

As the multitude of enslaved individuals embarking on the process of emancipation fundamentally changed the Civil War, their actions similarly catalyzed the debates and policy changes regarding the recruitment of Black soldiers to serve in the military. Although emancipation and enlistment might easily conflate, as even noted by Lincoln later in the war, “any different policy in regard to the colored man deprives us of his help... This is not a question of sentiment or taste, but one of physical force,” when the war began, that sentiment and taste significantly separated the questions of emancipation and enlistment.¹³⁰ While a growing number in the North agreed with the call to abolish slavery, not all felt comfortable granting Black men the ability to serve in military. Essentially, for much of the white Northern public, the end of slavery did not equate to the granting of political and social freedoms enjoyed by white citizens. Although many Northern states had abolished slavery decades ago, pervasive racism fostered a culture of segregation expressed in law and society. As Bob Luke and John David Smith note, “in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, and New York, private

¹²⁹ CMSR of soldiers from Northeast Florida; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 10; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*; Schafer, *Thunder on the River*; OR, ser. 1, vol. 22, 244; “Our Expeditionary Correspondence,” *New York Herald*, April 2, 1862, 2.

¹³⁰ Williams, *I Freed Myself*, 7-8.

institutions such as streetcar companies, theaters, and churches generally excluded black patrons, as did public institutions such as courts, militias, and schools.”¹³¹ Even the Republican Party platform, which explicitly called for the end of slavery in federal territories, did not make any such call to confer citizenship on Blacks. Therefore, to reach the point where formerly enslaved and free Black men from Northeast Florida and across the country could officially enlist and serve, the laws and attitudes of Northerners would have to drastically change.¹³²

The changes in law that led to the creation of Black regiments had significant connections to emancipation. The continuous flow of formerly enslaved Blacks to U.S. lines compelled military leaders to seek guidance from Congress and the President about how they should manage this influx of refugees. At the time, members of Congress had diverse views regarding the war’s connection to slavery and the role of Blacks in the conflict. Despite the passing of the Second Confiscation Act of 1862, which declared enslaved individuals who made their way to U.S. camps and outposts “forever free,” some Congressmen continued to worry about the adverse reaction of the Border States and white soldiers would have to the enlistment of Black soldiers or saw these efforts as more radical members and abolitionist members of Congress using the war in order to push for the equal rights for Black.¹³³ Others noted how the

¹³¹ Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 7-8.

¹³² For further discussion about the changing and nuanced views of the Northern public and Federal government towards abolition, equal rights, and enlistment see Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); Michael J. Vorenberg, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007); Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*.

¹³³ Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Freedom’s Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4; Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 14-15.

Confederates already used the labor of enslaved Blacks in their camps and that the U.S. military could do the same because, as Republican Preston King commented, “Nobody would, probably, object to their cooking.”¹³⁴ This argument, in particular, garnered significant support as the increasing number of Blacks entering and living in these refugee camps along U.S. military lines quickly became a growing liability and drain of military efforts and resources. Against the backdrop of continued military failures and growing challenges in recruiting volunteers, many in Congress began to look for other avenues to boost recruitment. Therefore, in the same month that Congress passed the Second Confiscation Act, Congress also passed the Militia Act of July 1862. This act gave Lincoln the authority to utilize African Americans in military capacities. However, that military service came with substantial caveats. Congress and the Lincoln administration still worried about backlash from the Northern public and the border states, so the law “clearly intended that the blacks serve as military laborers,” as Luke and Smith contend.¹³⁵ The classification of Blacks as military laborers would have later implications when Black soldiers demanded equal pay as soldiers and not as laborers. Regardless of the initial caveats, these laws set the government and military on a trajectory culminating in the Emancipation Proclamation, that declared “such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States.”¹³⁶

While the debates surrounding emancipation and Black enlistment came to a head in July 1862, U.S. Army officers, often in response to the swelling numbers of

¹³⁴ *Congressional Globe*, 37th Cong., 2nd sess. (1862): 3198, 3228, 3303.

¹³⁵ Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 15-16.

¹³⁶ Abraham Lincoln, *Emancipation Proclamation*, January 1, 1863, Presidential Proclamation 95, National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation>.

Black free people coming into their camps, had already attempted to make drastic policy changes for the military. Early on in the war, General John C. Fremont, then serving as the commander of U.S. forces in Missouri and west of the Mississippi, issued an emancipation order in Missouri declaring all enslaved people free. Fearing reprisals from Border States, the Lincoln administration rescinded the order a few weeks later and relieved Fremont of his command. Although the attempt proved unsuccessful, it did make an impression on one of Fremont's subordinates, David Hunter. An abolitionist and career soldier from New York, Hunter followed in Fremont's footsteps upon taking command of the Department of the South, which consisted of U.S. forces in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina.¹³⁷

In the spring of 1862, Hunter issued his own emancipatory order declaring all enslaved individuals in the department free and went a step further by calling for the recruitment and training of formerly enslaved Black men. Hunter justified his order to recruit Blacks based on the order he received to "employ all loyal persons offering their services in defense of the Union, and for the suppression of this rebellion." For Hunter, "loyal persons offering their service in defense of the Union" included the hundreds of formerly enslaved men and women who flowed into the U.S. base on Port Royal Island.¹³⁸ The decision to do both aligned with his vision of the war as a war to end slavery, which he laid out in a letter to Republican Senator Lyman Trumbull before the conflict began. "I would advance south, proclaiming the negro free and arming him as I

¹³⁷ Edward A. Miller Jr., *Lincoln's Abolitionist General: The Biography of David Hunter* (Columbia, NC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997).

¹³⁸ OR, Ser. 3, Vol. 2, 197.

go. The Great God of the Universe has determined that this is the only way in which the war is to be ended, and the sooner it is done the better.”¹³⁹

In other areas of the war, other generals attempted similar moves as Hunter. In Kansas, the continuous flow of enslaved individuals escaping slavery in Missouri by crossing the border into Kansas provided the impetus for the unofficial formation of the first Black regiment. Senator and recruiting commissioner for Kansas, James H. Lane, began recruiting Black men in August of 1862. These actions violated federal policy at the time, as the Militia Act of 1862 had approved the use of Black men for military service but had not yet authorized the formation of Black regiments. Despite calls from the federal government for Lane to disband his unit, Lane continued to push forward with training. A month later, in October, the regiment successfully engaged enemy forces at Island Mount. As noted in one newspaper account, the Black soldiers “were rather hard to handle and keep back,...like a pair of young, wellfed horses, anxious to go—and go at the guerillas.”¹⁴⁰

During that same summer of 1862 near New Orleans, John W. Phelps attempted to raise regiments of Black soldiers in response to the stream of self-emancipating men who arrived at the federal outpost, Camp Parapet. Ironically, Phelps’ commander, General Benjamin Butler, denied his request to arm the formerly enslaved men. Instead, Butler ordered Phelps to treat the individuals as “contraband” and limit their activities to tasks like cutting timber and constructing fortifications. In response to the order, Phelps attempted to resign, but Butler denied his request. A few weeks later, a growing belief

¹³⁹ Quoted in Lorien Foote, *Rites of Retaliation: Civilization, Soldiers, and Campaigns in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 17; Miller, *Lincoln’s Abolitionist General*, vii, 79, 264; *OR*, Ser. 3, Vol. 2, 197.

¹⁴⁰ Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 21.

that Confederate forces planned to attack New Orleans, along with Butler's inability to obtain necessary reinforcements, compelled him to approve the federalization of the existing Black Louisiana state militia units. Once again, finding a legal loophole, Butler reasoned that activating a state militia already formed did not constitute a new policy or the creation of Black regiments.¹⁴¹

As news of Hunter's emancipation order and the recruitment of Black soldiers reached Washington, D.C., the decision faced immediate backlash. Within that same month, Lincoln issued his own proclamation rescinding Hunter's. In Congress, Representative Charles Wickliffe from the border state of Kentucky and an enslaver, demanded answers from Hunter about whether he had indeed organized a regiment of "fugitive slaves." In a clever response, Hunter replied that "no regiment of fugitive slaves has been or is being organized in this department. There is, however, a fine regiment of persons whose late masters are fugitive rebels." Upon hearing Hunter's response, Republicans in Congress cheered "with loud applause and boisterous manifestations of approbation."¹⁴²

Hunter's actions also elicited reprisals from Jefferson Davis and the Confederate government. In response to arming formerly enslaved Black men, the Confederate government issued its own proclamation condemning Hunter for arming "negro slaves for military service against their masters." Additionally, the order instructed Confederate military personnel to no longer consider Hunter, or "any other commissioned officer employed in drilling, organizing, or instructing slaves," public enemies, but rather as

¹⁴¹ Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 18-20.

¹⁴² OR, Ser. 3, Vol. 2, 196-198; Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 26.

outlaws.¹⁴³ To Confederates, they viewed these free people as “fugitive slaves,” and any attempt to arm or train them amounted to the incitement of a slave insurrection. The creation of Black regiments, particularly those composed of formerly enslaved men, conjured up images and stories of past violent revolts by enslaved people in the United States and elsewhere, like the violent Haitian revolt. As Colonel Thomas Higginson, who would later command the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment, noted, “the whole Southern coast at this moment trembles at the suggestion of such a thing—the camp of a regiment of freed slaves.”¹⁴⁴

While the fallout from the U.S. and Confederate governments proved significant, some of the most surprising resistance to Hunter’s actions came from the Black men living on the coast of South Carolina. Like many abolitionists, both inside and outside the military, Hunter assumed that the formerly enslaved would flock to the opportunity to join the U.S. Army, and over time, many did. However, Hunter and others did not account for the agency of these men and women, who had differing visions of the war and freedom. Particularly in the early months and years of the conflict, enslaved Black men and women likely encountered rumors and true stories of U.S. military officials returning freedom-seeking individuals to their enslavers. Rumors of the U.S. military sending them to enslavement in Cuba were frequent. What seemed to a government official as evidence of “their indisposition to become soldiers” more likely stemmed from the tenuous situation these formerly enslaved men and women found themselves in and their distrust in both the U.S. government and military.¹⁴⁵ The enemies to their freedom

¹⁴³ OR, ser. 1, Vol. 14, 599.

¹⁴⁴ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 9.

¹⁴⁵ OR, Ser. 3, Vol. 2, 56.

might not only wear grey uniforms. Finding themselves in a warzone with an ill-defined legal status meant that many had to maintain a level of distrust or caution out of survival.¹⁴⁶

Frustrated by the lackluster recruiting efforts, Hunter compounded the problem by issuing orders that effectively called for the forced conscription of able-bodied Black men living on the Sea Island Plantations in and around Port Royal.¹⁴⁷ As word spread of uniformed squadrons of soldiers coming to the various plantations to round up men, Black men responded with varying levels of resistance. Treasury Department Special Agent Edward L. Pierce noted in his report, “the colored people became suspicious of the presence of the companies of soldiers detailed for the service.”¹⁴⁸ On one occasion, after a detachment of three soldiers spent the night at one of the plantation houses and awoke to carry out the order, “we saw where had been but a few moments before field hands, hard at work, nothing but horses and plows without drivers. On inquiry we found that no one could tell the whereabouts of any of the able-bodied men.”¹⁴⁹ An older unnamed man at the plantation said that the men had found it “very necessary to go to the woods to split rails.”¹⁵⁰ On another plantation, all but two men “escaped to the woods, having gained information in regard to the movement from a women who had seen the soldiers at Mrs. Jenkin’s plantation.”¹⁵¹ The use of tactics like hiding in nearby woods or relying on underground networks of communication between plantations recalls similar methods developed and used throughout the antebellum era as enslaved

¹⁴⁶ Rogers, “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers, Feb. 13, 1863; Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 21-23; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 15.

¹⁴⁷ *OR*, Ser. 3, Vol. 2, 50.

¹⁴⁸ *OR*, Ser. 3, Vol. 2, 57.

¹⁴⁹ *OR*, Ser. 3, Vol. 2, 58.

¹⁵⁰ *OR*, Ser. 3, Vol. 2, 58.

¹⁵¹ *OR*, Ser. 3, Vol. 2, 58.

individuals attempted to avoid being sold and separated from family at the hands of slave traders or escaping harsh physical punishment from their enslavers.¹⁵²

The men who failed to escape into the woods confronted a deeply problematic scene—a government official flanked by white soldiers with loaded guns. One of the government officials assigned to manage an abandoned plantation later recounted how the “wives and children embraced the husband...wailing and screaming were loud, and the women threw themselves in despair on the ground.”¹⁵³ A distraught woman at the Jenkins’ plantation on Saint Helena Island declared how she had “lost all her children and friends, and now her husband was taken and she must die uncared for.”¹⁵⁴ One woman, not believing the soldiers and seeing the similarities to this situation and a slave sale, attempted to follow them to see where they intended to take the men. A plantation superintendent noted that the forced conscription order by Hunter, and the manner of its execution caused many of the free people to question whether the U.S. government really cared about their interests. Despite efforts by soldiers and Treasury agents to reassure them, these actions eroded what little trust many had in military and government officials leading many to wonder if the “old fetters” of slavery were better than this “new” liberty.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² *OR*, Ser. 3, Vol. 2, 50-59; For a discussion about the development of underground networks of communication between plantations see Errol A. Henderson, “Slave Religion, Slave Hiring, and the Incipient Proletarianization of Enslaved Black Labor: Developing Du Bois’ Thesis on Black Participation in the Civil War as a Revolution,” *Journal of African American Studies* 19, no. 2 (June 2015): 192–213.

¹⁵³ *OR*, Ser. 3, Vol. 2, 57.

¹⁵⁴ *OR*, Ser. 3, Vol. 2, 58.

¹⁵⁵ *OR*, Ser. 3, Vol. 2, 58-60. In many areas of U.S. occupation throughout the South, and Port Royal in particular, where white Southerners abandoned their plantations, the U.S. government and military attempted to continue cultivating cotton and other crops for the war effort, utilizing the labor of the formerly enslaved Blacks who had worked on those plantations. In these instances, the U.S. military came to the enslaved and brought emancipation to their doorsteps. See Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999) for an in-depth examination of these efforts.

Hunter's ignorant attempt to forcibly conscript Black men came to limited success due to this resistance, only raising one company. Unlike the perception held by many white officers that enslaved people lacked intelligence and ability, these free people did have a keen awareness of the volatile situation around them. Their fears and acts of resistance show a people who acted based on their understanding of the circumstances. Some wanted to remain with their families and existing networks of support and saw military service as a separation from those. Although they lacked full knowledge of the broader conflict, they recognized that their survival depended on making decisions that gave them the best chance for safety and freedom. Hunter's actions also highlight that their freedom from slavery had not yet translated into the full freedoms of U.S. citizens. Even under a supposedly friendly U.S. military presence, their freedom remained fragile and still under the control of white men.¹⁵⁶

This combined backlash from Congress, the Lincoln Administration, and the Black men Hunter attempted to conscript forced him to officially disband the 1st South Carolina, apart from one company, which Hunter kept intact and used to garrison St. Simon's Island off the coast of Georgia. The disbandment did not last long because the ongoing flow of formerly enslaved people to Port Royal, and the passage of the 1st and 2nd Confiscation Acts and the Militia Act, revived the effort to enlist Black soldiers by the fall of 1862. Hunter, along with the abolitionist military governor of the Department of the South, General Rufus Saxton, resumed efforts to form an all-Black regiment. While many free people from South Carolina still harbored significant trepidation toward the U.S. military, the arrival of numerous formerly enslaved people from Northeast Florida

¹⁵⁶ Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 28.

provided the needed momentum for recruiting. Many of these individuals arrived at Port Royal as a direct result of two military expeditions up the St. Johns River in the previous months. Not having experienced Hunter's forced conscription attempt, the men from Northeast Florida showed notable enthusiasm for enlisting. As Colonel Higginson, commander of the 1st South Carolina, noted, Hunter's folly "was, on the whole, a great injury." However, the men from Florida did not have the same "unfavorable influences" deterring them from enlisting.¹⁵⁷

As men like Houston lined up to enlist in the U.S. Army, they perhaps reflected on the journey they had taken to get to this point. As demonstrated, that journey looked different for most of these men and happened at different times. However, common among many of their emancipation stories was their decision to act free themselves and to embark on a journey of emancipation that carried immense risk. While U.S. government and military officials debated opinions and policies regarding emancipation and the ending of slavery, men like Houston, February, Delk, and countless others did not wait for government permission to grasp their freedom. As the U.S. Army and Navy moved further into the South in the primary hope of maintaining their country's union, they came into contact with an enslaved population who saw the true nature of the war. As military and government policy changed regarding emancipation and the legal status of enslaved people, these changes more reflected the reality on the ground than effectuating innovative change. The "simple lives led in stormy periods" noted by Colonel Higginson failed to grasp the ways in which these people, through the use of

¹⁵⁷ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 15-16; Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 34; Ashe, *Firebrand of Liberty*.

their agency, changed the debates surrounding emancipation and altered the nature of the war.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Susie King Taylor, *A Black Women's Civil War Memoirs: Reminiscences of my Life in Camp with the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops, Late 1st South Carolina Volunteers*, (New York: M. Wiener Pub., 1988), xii.

Chapter 2: The Enlistment Process

On September 4, 1864, February Christopher approached the recruiting officers in Jacksonville, Florida, to enlist in the United States Colored Infantry. Like many of the men he enlisted with, February had taken a unique path to that point. He had previously enlisted in the United States Navy almost two years earlier, after escaping slavery by boarding a U.S. naval vessel as it monitored the mouth of the St. Johns River. Over the last two years, he had served aboard multiple U.S. Navy ships, including the flagship of Admiral Samuel Du Pont, the *U.S.S. Wabash*. After spending much of his naval service on blockade duty outside Charleston Harbor, February received a transfer to the transport ship *U.S.S. General Hunter*, which embarked on an expedition up the St. Johns River. While returning from Palatka, Florida, and heading north to Jacksonville, the ship struck a Confederate torpedo early in the morning on April 16, 1864. With little naval presence on the St. Johns throughout much of the war, the Confederates used torpedoes—a floating explosive device hidden in the water designed to detonate when touched by a naval vessel—to obstruct U.S. advances in the region. The torpedo severely damaged the ship's bow and sank it within minutes. Despite the damage, the torpedo killed only one sailor. Having survived the attack, February boarded the *U.S.S. Wyoming* and disembarked in Jacksonville, which the U.S. military had occupied for a fourth time a few months earlier. In Jacksonville, he enlisted again, this time joining the 21st United States Colored Infantry Regiment under the name February Francis.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ CMSR for February Francis, Corporal, Company K, 21st Regiment USCI; *USS Muster Roll*, 1863; July 1, 1863, 53; *Muster Roll of Naval Ships 1860–1900*; RG 24; NARA Building, Washington, DC; February Christopher pension record no. 672,736; service of February Francis (Pvt., Co. K, 21st United States Colored Troops, Civil War); Civil War and Later Pension Files; Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; NARA, Washington, D.C.; “From Florida,” *New York Tribune* (New York City, NY), April 26, 1864. The use of his first name “February,” rather than his surname, is intended to eliminate confusion, given that February changed his surname multiple times throughout his life.

What led to his decision to re-enlist in the U.S. Army rather than the Navy, or why he changed his name, remains unclear based on the available military and pension documentation. However, February's account provides some important insights into the enlistment process. His story demonstrates that the path that soldiers took to enlist varied across time and space. Although the circumstances of his name change remain unclear, his decision to remove the surname of his enslaver illustrates the potential of the enlistment process to allow men to forge new identities. Most of all, February's account offers a deeply personal example of how the war affected the lives of Black Americans and how his actions played a small yet crucial part in transforming a conflict that started as a struggle to preserve the republic into a fight for Black emancipation and freedom.¹⁶⁰

After their physical journey to enlistment, these men faced another transition: the social and mental transformation into soldiers. Their shift from enslaved to soldiers began with their enlistment. While enlistment generally consisted of a one-time event, it also represented a short but revealing process that began with recruitment or a decision to enlist, followed by an official enlistment with a U.S. recruiting officer, and included providing demographic and personal details, undergoing an initial medical examination, and receiving uniforms, a firearm, and necessary equipment. This process of enlistment offers insights into the experience of these men while enslaved, the society and

¹⁶⁰ CMSR for February Francis, Corporal, Company K, 21st USCI; February Christopher pension record no. 672,736; service of February Francis (Pvt., Co. K, 21st United States Colored Troops, Civil War); Civil War and Later Pension Files; Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; NARA, Washington, D.C.; For further discussion about the change in the goal of the war for President Abraham Lincoln and the United States see Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

environment that produced them, their use of agency, their possible motivations for service, how enlistment affected their families, and how it highlighted prevailing racist beliefs and perspectives in the North. Focusing on both individual accounts and the conglomeration of men from Northeast Florida presents an intriguing opportunity to situate these personal stories within broader historical contexts, allowing for a more personal and concrete engagement with broader narratives regarding enlistment. Additionally, it provides an opportunity to analyze the group as a dataset and compare it with what historians have argued in the past. Slowing down the story and analyzing this key event in their lives helps one understand what made this experience unique for Black soldiers.

The first Black men to enlist in the United States Army occurred in the last two months of 1862, when more than one hundred men from Northeast Florida enlisted in the 1st South Carolina as part of the initial wave of enlistments. Over the course of the war, more than 200 Black men from the region, most of whom were formerly enslaved, enlisted, even as late as March 1865.¹⁶¹ By the time these men began enlisting, the War Department had overhauled the state-led record-keeping systems used at the start of the war and established a standardized process. Men like Henry Houston, February Francis, and Robert Sutton, along with others, stood before a white recruiting officer who asked for information that they had never previously given to a government official, some of which they did not know. The standard details the officer requested and recorded in the muster roll included name, age, height, complexion, place of birth, and

¹⁶¹ Estimate made based on a compilation and research into the men who had the region listed in their enlistment records based on the CMSR of soldiers from Northeast Florida, or based on information garnered from pension records.

occupation. Additionally, the recruiting officer would record the date and location of the enlistment. The military used most of this information to identify and track individuals, especially to differentiate those with similar names, and determine instances of desertion. Some details, such as occupation, allowed regimental commanders to identify men they believed had valuable skills or leadership qualities. Beneath this simple demographic data lies a variety of family backgrounds and antebellum experiences. While the data given to officers does not reveal the full life stories of these men, analyzing both individual and group data offers valuable insights into the lives of these men and the circumstances that shaped them.¹⁶²

One of the first pieces of demographic information any soldier provided included their name. As the most basic form of identification, the name might seem mundane. However, for formerly enslaved men, giving their first and last names meant much more. As Amy Taylor points out, the enlistment process became “the first time the federal government acknowledged their individual names.”¹⁶³ Historians have noted the significance of naming practices throughout the chronology of slavery in the American South. From their initial beginnings with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and early enslaved acculturation, enslaved naming practices have constituted a point of contention and resistance within the enslaver-enslaved relationship. Often, upon purchasing an enslaved individual, the enslaver would give them a new name. In the case of enslaved children, enslavers sometimes asserted their dominance by intervening in the naming of these children. Enslavers used a variety of names that

¹⁶² CMSR of soldiers from Northeast Florida; Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 39-40.

¹⁶³ Amy Murrell Taylor, *Embattled Freedom: Journeys through the Civil War's Slave Refugee Camps* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 111.

sought to mock, dehumanize, or strip the enslaved of their individuality. For example, enslavers used classical names like Caesar, Cato, Pompey, and others to mock their enslaved. Among the hundreds of formerly enslaved men from Northeast Florida who enlisted in the USCI, a number continued to carry these classical names, including three Catoes, three Scipios, and a Plato.¹⁶⁴

However, these attempts by enslavers to reshape and dilute the identities of their enslaved met resistance in a variety of ways. As noted by historian Ira Berlin, while enslavers sought to assert their authority through naming, “slaves soon took back this signature of their identity. “while slaves answered to the names their owners imposed on them, many clandestinely maintained their African names.”¹⁶⁵ James Curry, an enslaved man from North Carolina, noted that, in an act of resistance to these naming practices, his mother gave her children two names. “It is not common for slaves to have more than one name, but my mother was a proud-spirited woman, and she gave her children two.”¹⁶⁶ On another occasion, an enslaved man, Quasho Quando, “simply refused to accept” the new name, Julius Caesar, given to him by his owner.¹⁶⁷ Berlin further notes that resistance to naming practices grew over time as “slaves also began to wrench control of the naming process from their owners.”¹⁶⁸ Particularly in cases of self-emancipation, enslaved individuals might change their names to hide from their

¹⁶⁴ Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993); 45; Anna-Maria Balbach, “Caesar, Jack, and Cuffee: African-American Fugitive Slave Names in the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century,” *Onoma* 55 (2020), 212; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 447; Fields-Black, *Combee*, 26-27; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 95.

¹⁶⁵ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 120; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 21.

¹⁶⁶ Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony*, 130.

¹⁶⁷ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 188.

¹⁶⁸ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 130.

enslavers, to assert their right to make such a choice, or to reflect the name of a skill they proudly possessed. While most enslaved individuals eventually came to accept their new names, they continued their resistance through other means. When possible, they would, as with Curry's mother, assert their own individuality and agency by giving their children multiple names, naming their children after grandparents or parents, avoiding the use of the first name of their enslaver, and, in general, selecting names for their children that "served their own purposes and differentiated themselves from whites around them."¹⁶⁹

These instances of asserting agency through naming practices persisted into the Civil War. Frequently, self-emancipated and free Blacks would change their first or last names to assert their new identities. As Berlin suggests, "a new name was both a symbol of personal liberation and an act of political defiance; it reversed the enslavement process and confirmed the free black person's newly won liberty."¹⁷⁰

February Francis, formerly enslaved by the Christopher family, enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1862 under the last name Christopher. Later, when he joined the U.S. Army in Jacksonville on September 4, 1864, he shed the surname of his enslaver and enlisted as February Francis. In another case, a formerly enslaved man may have changed his both names when he enlisted as Abraham Lincoln.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 46; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 445, 447; John C. Inscoe, "Slave Naming Practices: A Challenge to the Gutman Thesis," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 94, no. 4 (1993), 260.

¹⁷⁰ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 239

¹⁷¹ CMSR for February Francis, Corporal, Company K, 21st USCI; CMSR for Abraham Lincoln, Private, Company F, 33rd USCI; Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*; Inscoe, "Slave Naming Practices", 263; Balbach, "Caesar, Jack, and Cuffee: African-American Fugitive Slave Names in the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century," 212, 224; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 447. Although Abraham was a common name among enslaved men, its combination with Lincoln in this instance likely did not come from an enslaver.

Enslaved naming practices not only reflected resistance but also highlighted efforts to solidify community ties. As historian John C. Inscoe notes, many enslaved individuals retained their original enslaver's surname even after being sold to another enslaver. Inscoe suggests that this phenomenon serves "as evidence of a conscious communal identity felt by a slave community."¹⁷² Perhaps for this reason, Benjamin Hatcher from St. Augustine, Florida, who enlisted in the 21st USCT on June 13, 1863, kept the surname of his enslaver, Isaac Hatcher. Historian Eugene D. Genovese suggested that adopting their enslaver's surname also potentially served to "establish a real history." In making the decision to change their name, Genovese notes, these formerly enslaved people risked robbing themselves "of the only history they had and, more specifically, rob them of contact with the black fathers [or white fathers] who had so often been ripped from them."¹⁷³ In other instances, Blacks in the Deep South sought to preserve the names of their former owners, "knowing full well that ties with powerful planters could serve as a protection and perhaps even a source of patronage."¹⁷⁴ Therefore, in an attempt to maintain community ties, personal and familial identity, or connection to the prestige of their former enslaver, some soldiers retained their enslavers' names.¹⁷⁵

Henry Houston's surname offers an intriguing example of the conflict and resistance that sometimes came with a name. Houston was born to an enslaved mother, known in his pension record as Mrs. Johnson, and an enslaver father, John Houston, who likely perpetrated sexual violence against Henry's mother or, at minimum,

¹⁷² Inscoe, "Slave Naming Practices", 262.

¹⁷³ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 446.

¹⁷⁴ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 321.

¹⁷⁵ CMSR for Benjamin Hatcher, Private, Company A, 21st USCI; Fields-Black, *Combee*, 26-27.

engaged in a problematic, non-consensual sexual relationship. Either out of embarrassment or resentful of her husband's infidelity, Houston's wife would not allow Henry to carry the surname Houston while enslaved on the Houston plantation; instead, he went by the surname Sanchez, after one of the overseers. The wife's reaction gives credence to the problematic circumstances surrounding the sexual affair that led to Henry's birth. Given these fraught circumstances, Henry's choice to use the name "Henry Houston" on his enlistment papers perhaps reflects resistance to attempts to hide his parentage throughout his life to that point. In the end, no matter what name the Black recruit ultimately gave to the recruiting officer, that moment carried more significance than for other Civil War soldiers. Through that choice, even in the decision not to change their name, they continued a long-standing aspect of enslaved resistance. It afforded these formerly enslaved men the opportunity to assert their identity, agency, and to stake a claim on a profoundly personal sign of freedom.¹⁷⁶

The identification of their birthplace represented another seemingly routine piece of demographic information that masked the forced migrations that characterized slavery in the Antebellum South. The domestic slave trade, a term historians use to refer to the forced migrations of enslaved individuals, constitutes a distinctive feature of American slavery and of slavery during the antebellum period. The origins of this domestic slave trade lie in the rise of cotton as the premier cash crop in the South, the federal government's ban on the Transatlantic Slave Trade in 1808, and the rapid expansion of the United States' territory in the South, which led to the second middle

¹⁷⁶ Inscoc, "Slave Naming Practices," 262; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 140; Henry Houston, Private, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; for further discussion on sexual violence in antebellum slavery see Shannon Eaves, *Sexual Violence and American Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2024).

passage; the forcible movement of about 1 million enslaved people between 1790 and 1860.¹⁷⁷ These factors produced a situation in which enslavers sought opportunities for land and profits by moving their families and wealth, including those they enslaved, into newly conquered or acquired land, or where enslavers sought to settle growing debts or gain profits by selling those enslaved on their plantations west or south. As historian Peter Kolchin notes, this “sale of slaves from East to West continued to play a vital role in the flourishing of Southern slavery.” In his work, *Slave Country*, historian Adam Rothman expands this argument to posit that the proliferation of the domestic slave trade lies at the creation of the states that will become known as the Deep South.¹⁷⁸

On a personal level, the rise of the domestic slave trade represented a traumatic experience for the enslaved, “whether they accompanied their owners or traders” or sold by them.¹⁷⁹ Accounts of these forced movements demonstrate the numerous instances, extent, and trauma they invoked. More than mere rumors, the threat of sale represented an existential threat to them individually and their families. As Fields-Black explains, “slaveholders sometimes threatened those they held in bondage with sale to slave traders from the South.”¹⁸⁰ Thomas Hughes, born into slavery in Virginia, was sold multiple times throughout his life, beginning at 11 months old, both locally and across state lines. As a result of these sales, Hughes suffered forced removal from Virginia to Louisiana, to Kentucky, and back to Louisiana. Edinbur Randall, born in Alabama,

¹⁷⁷ The term “second middle passage” comes from the work of historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In particular, his article “What was the 2nd Middle Passage?” *The Root*, January 28, 2013, <https://www.theroot.com/what-was-the-2nd-middle-passage>.

¹⁷⁸ Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁷⁹ Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 96-98.

¹⁸⁰ Fields-Black, *Combee*, 92.

experienced forcible migration at the hands of his enslaver after she married a man from Jacksonville, Florida, and moved there, taking him with her. Charity Bowery, enslaved in North Carolina, saw her sixteen children sold “one after another” as part of the domestic slave trade.¹⁸¹ While individually unique, this experience of forced migration became “a central experience in the lives of black slaves.”¹⁸²

Within the history of mass forced migration from the domestic slave trade, Florida holds a nuanced place in terms of its chronology and precipitating events. Like many of the “Old Southern” states such as Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas, particularly as it relates to the area’s location on the coast and its early colonization, Florida’s northeast coastline had a long history of slavery, stretching back to the 1500s, when early Spanish settlers imported enslaved Africans to the port city of St. Augustine. However, unlike those other states, where slavery became more prominent as the market for New World tobacco grew, the lack of growth in the area under Spanish rule, combined with the absence of a cash crop, led to minimal growth of slavery and the overall population. By 1786, blacks, free and enslaved, made up roughly 27 percent of Florida’s population.¹⁸³ Therefore, the growth of slavery and the forced migration of enslaved people into Florida occurred at different times than the rest of the Deep South. Most frequently, the trading of Florida between various European colonial powers and the United States, whether through conquest or treaty, spurred instances of increased movement of white and European settlers, who often forcibly took their enslaved with

¹⁸¹ Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 263.

¹⁸² Damian Alan Pargas, *Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2; Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 211-212, 261-262, 320-325. The threat of sale included times when the enslaver passed away. Under wills or as a means to pay unpaid debts, enslaved people faced sale and family separations. Fields-Black, *Combee*, 85.

¹⁸³ Larry Eugene Rivers, *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 6.

them. Instances of forced migration into Florida occurred at the early beginnings of the United States when, as a result of the American Revolution, the evacuation of Charleston in 1782 led many loyalists to move to Northeast Florida. As they fled South Carolina, these enslavers forcibly brought their enslaved with them, where many remained under Spanish rule.¹⁸⁴

Following the war and the Treaty of Paris in 1783, Spain once again took control of Florida. Several years later, the Spanish crown sought to incentivize growth in Florida by issuing a royal order that offered substantial land grants to foreigners who settled in the region. The order granted each head of household 100 acres and an additional 50 acres for each dependent, which could include enslaved people. In return, the order required settlers to swear an oath of allegiance to the Spanish crown and cultivate the land for a minimum of ten years. The order garnered the interest of some enslavers along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, who, over the next two decades, recognized this opportunity, acquired the land, and relocated their families to the area. As historian Larry E. Rivers noted, the 14 years after 1790 saw the arrival of some 750 white families that took advantage of the Spanish policy to obtain land. With them, they brought over 5,000 enslaved people. As they moved their families, these enslavers typically moved many, if not all, of their enslaved people to the region as well. In 1791, John McQueen became one of the first settlers to profit from this order. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, but raised in Charleston, South Carolina, McQueen owned a plantation in Georgia by the end of the American Revolution. However, delinquency in

¹⁸⁴ For further discussion about the introduction of slavery into Florida and its development under the Spanish see: Rivers, *Slavery in Florida*; Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

paying his taxes in Georgia compelled him to mortgage his property and seek a new start in Florida. After moving to East Florida and gaining the friendship of Spanish officials in St. Augustine, McQueen received Fort George Island, an island of about 500 acres near the mouth of the St. Johns River. Two years later, McQueen had forcibly moved 229 enslaved people from South Carolina to Northeast Florida. Nearly a decade later, McQueen sold the land to Georgian John Houston McIntosh, who, in turn, sold it thirteen years later to South Carolinian Zephaniah Kingsley.¹⁸⁵

Another Georgian and the founder of Jacksonville, Isaiah David Hart, moved to Florida as a young boy with his family when his father received a land grant from the Spanish Government. With each of these purchases and the voluntary movement of white settlers came the subsequent forced migration of enslaved people from South Carolina and Georgia to Florida. As noted by biological anthropologist, William S. Pollitzer, this movement of enslavers from Georgia and South Carolina aided in the transportation of Gullah Geechee speech and culture along the Sea Islands of the South Atlantic, including to Northeast Florida. The forced migration of Blacks along the Sea Islands of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida created instances of kinship ties that continue today among the surviving Gullah Geechee people.¹⁸⁶

The subsequent influx of migrants into the region occurred in 1821, when the United States officially acquired Florida as a territory following its transfer under the Adams-Onís Treaty in 1819. During this territorial period, from 1821 to 1845, when

¹⁸⁵ Daniel W. Stowell, *Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve Historic Resource Study* (Atlanta: National Park Service, 1996), 33-40.

¹⁸⁶ Stowell, *Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve Historic Resource Study*, 33-40; William S. Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 62.; Rivers, *Slavery in Florida*, 68.

Florida became a state, wealthy families in the older regions of the South, such as Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, saw opportunity in the new state and moved in significant numbers to Florida, particularly to the middle region near Tallahassee, forcibly moving their enslaved people with them. Northeast Florida saw moderate growth as plantation owners from coastal South Carolina and Georgia purchased land and moved into the area. William S. Delk moved from Liberty County, Georgia, and became the first white settler of Rock Springs, Florida, in central Florida. His decision to emigrate to Florida not only affected Delk and his family but also uprooted the lives of the enslaved individuals he forced to move with him, including Joseph Delk and Anthony Frazier. Like some of the freemen who enlisted in USCI units from Northeast Florida, Delk and Frazier had already experienced significant upheavals in their lives due to forced migrations or repeated sales. Unlike white soldiers, who likely never faced a significant threat of forced migration, many formerly enslaved soldiers brought with them a history of disruptions that continued into their emancipation and military service.¹⁸⁷

Another source of forced migration came from the economic uncertainty that characterized plantation agriculture, which often led enslavers to relocate multiple times in search of profit, or to sell enslaved people in order to pay off debts. As white Americans came into Florida, forcibly bringing their enslaved people with them, many struggled to find the prosperity they had desired. In general, the plantation economy

¹⁸⁷ *The Apopka Chief*, "The Weird Story of Rock Springs," Apopka, Florida, August 29, 1900; Stowell, *Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve Historic Resource Study*, 43-46; CMSR for Joseph Delk, Private, Company I, 21st USCT; CMSR for Anthony Frazier, Private, Company K, 21st USCT; For a more detailed exploration of the movement of Southern Planters to areas like Florida see Edward E. Baptist, *Creating an Old South: Middle Florida's Plantation Frontier before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

throughout the South required highly speculative operations, with landowners consistently incurring significant debt to purchase land, supplies, and enslaved people. As a result, income fluctuated widely, depending on several factors, including weather and harvest yields. Enslavers' records typically make frequent reference to their crops, the weather, or the harvest. Laura Gibbs, whose family owned Fort George Island in the 1840s discussed in a letter to her brother George William her hopes that the profits from the 1846 harvest "may make up for the last lost years crop."¹⁸⁸ In Northeast Florida and elsewhere in the South, the lack of consistent profits made bankruptcies and financial crises a common feature of the plantation economy. This, in turn, led to the forced relocation of enslaved people as their enslavers moved elsewhere in a continued pursuit of profits or through sales and auctions to pay off their debts.¹⁸⁹

The territorial period not only saw enslaved people move into Florida but also the forced removal of enslaved and free Blacks from Florida. Despite Kingsley's efforts to persuade the territorial legislature to adopt his view of a three-tiered social hierarchy of whites, free Blacks, and enslaved, the legislature passed racial codes that severely limited the activities of free Blacks in Florida, prohibited interracial marriages, banned children of interracial unions from inheriting their parents' estates, made manumission more difficult, and forced newly freed slaves to emigrate. This radical change in racial

¹⁸⁸ Laura Gibbs to Rosa Burroughs, 15 July 1846, Taylor Papers, in the private possession of Ernest and Betty Houseman, Orlando, FL, quoted in Stowell, *Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve Historic Resource Study*, 53. Gibbs was related to Zephaniah Kingsley through her marriage to Kingsley Beatty Gibbs, who was the son of Kingsley's sister Isabella.

¹⁸⁹ For additional reading regarding the financing and financial hardships related to the Southern antebellum plantation economy see Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974); Sharon Ann Murphy, *Banking on Slavery: Financing Southern Expansion in the Antebellum United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

policies, particularly in Northeast Florida, led Kingsley to move many of his family and enslaved people to a colony he established in Haiti called Mayorasgo de Koka.¹⁹⁰

Regarding this question of birthplace, evidence of these discrepancies also exists between the birthplaces recorded on their muster rolls and those in their pension records. For example, according to February Francis' enlistment records, he was born in Jacksonville, Florida. However, based on a statement he made in his pension record, his birth took place on Talbot Island. In another case, the military records of Cato Green list his birthplace as Dorchester County, South Carolina, while another document has him listed as a native of Jacksonville. Hatcher has St. Augustine listed as his birthplace on his enlistment record. Yet, according to his pension records, Hatcher was born in Charleton County, Georgia. The domestic slave trade stands as a plausible explanation for these discrepancies; however, other factors can also explain these inconsistencies. Among the enslaved, birthplace and home could encompass multiple locations due to kinship ties that extended across various spaces. With a lack of birth records to truly verify one's birthplace, many enslaved had a more fluid understanding of familial connections to geography and thus could think they came from multiple places. Moreover, since this process involved humans, there exists the possibility of human error on the part of the white officer who likely did not bother to check or verify. As these officers had little to no familiarity with the region, they probably relied on major cities or general counties when recording a soldier's birthplace, as in the case of February

¹⁹⁰ Stowell, *Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve Historic Resource Study*, 43-46; Zephaniah Kingsley, "Address to the Legislative Council of Florida on the Subject of Its Colored Population" by Z. Kingsley, A Planter of That Territory," manuscript in State Library of Florida, Tallahassee, FL; Daniel L. Schafer, *Anna Madgigine Jai Kingsley: African Princess, Florida Slave, Plantation Slaveowner* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

Francis. That potential for human error also extended to government officials in the 1890s, as they compiled the Compiled Military Service Record by transcribing information from the original muster rolls.¹⁹¹

For Black soldiers, especially many of those from Florida, the simple question of birthplace highlighted how movement and migration had characterized their lives, produced individual and familial trauma, and revealed the limits of agency under enslavement. The circumstances of answering such a question, as they enlisted in the U.S. Army, perhaps also reminded them of their journey to this moment. A journey many chose, for the first time in their lives, to take of their own volition. Men like February, Delk, and Frazier seized upon the circumstances produced by the war to expand the limits of their agency by choosing where they would move.¹⁹²

Another crucial piece of information from enlistment records related to geography included the date and location of enlistment. For recruits from Northeast Florida, these details reflected U.S. military actions in that region during the war. Although the U.S. military and government had reversed their position on enlisting Black men by the fall of 1862, the process of that recruitment remained unclear. In the Department of the South, Port Royal and Beaufort served as the primary recruiting centers for the entire region. However, recruiting in that area faced several drawbacks, most notably General Hunter's attempt to forcibly conscript Black men. Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson noted as much in his diary, remarking that the failed attempt had created distrust among

¹⁹¹ CMSR for February Francis, Corporal, Company A, 21st USCI; CMSR for Benjamin Hatcher, Private, Company A, 21st USCI; CMSR for Cato Green, Corporal, Company I, 33rd USCI; February Francis, Corporal, Company K, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹⁹² *The Apopka Chief*, "The Weird Story of Rock Springs," Apopka, Florida, August 29, 1900; February Francis, Corporal, Company K, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Blacks toward the government and that “those who now refuse to enlist have a great influence in deterring others.”¹⁹³ Despite this rocky start, military officials in the Department of the South employed other strategies to enhance the recruitment of Black troops. Changes in how the army recruited Black soldiers in this region, much like emancipation, resulted from the actions of numerous Black men and decisions by military officials. When analyzing the recruiting data for men from Northeast Florida as a group, certain patterns emerge that link enlistment to military activities at specific times and locations. Notably, three dates and locations stand out as moments and places where Black men came to enlist: a four-month span from November 1862 to February 1863 in Beaufort, South Carolina; the spring of 1863 in Jacksonville, Florida; and the summer of 1863 in Fernandina.¹⁹⁴

Before the first significant number of Black men from Northeast Florida enlisted in late 1862 and early 1863, the U.S. military had conducted several expeditions up the St. Johns River and occupied Jacksonville. The first occupation occurred in spring 1862, and the second in October of the same year. General Hunter ordered the second evacuation based on his belief that “a garrison of five thousand was needed to hold the place,” a force he did not have at his disposal.¹⁹⁵ Many enslaved Blacks, including those who later enlisted, took advantage of the presence of U.S. forces and the diminished Confederate forces to escape slavery and reach the federal refugee camps by way of U.S. naval vessels that carried expeditionary forces up and down the St. Johns. The

¹⁹³ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1870), 15-16.

¹⁹⁴ CMSR of soldiers from Northeast Florida; Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 66.

¹⁹⁵ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 98.

October expedition, in particular, proved critical to recruiting efforts, as the arrival of these newly freed men in Beaufort, directly or through Fernandina, coincided with General Rufus Saxton's renewed efforts to recruit Blacks in the wake of congressional approval, secured by the passage of the Militia Act. These Florida men provided needed numbers and did not carry with them some of the "unfavorable influences" that plagued the South Carolina men, such as Hunter's forced conscription or white soldiers' attempts to frighten the women the wives of Black refugees "with doleful tales of plans for putting us in the front rank in all battles, and such silly talk."¹⁹⁶ In late November, Higginson recorded the arrival of men from Fernandina, and in early December, he again noted the arrival of General Saxton and seventy-six recruits from Fernandina. Neither of these 1862 expeditions had the explicit purpose of emancipating and recruiting Black soldiers; rather, the influx of new recruits resulted from two distinct but connected circumstances. On the one hand, Saxton and U.S. forces needed more recruits, particularly those who lacked the baggage of distrust of the U.S. military as a result of Hunter's disastrous attempt at forced conscription and had an eagerness and willingness to enlist. On the other hand, Black men took independent action to free themselves from slavery, regardless of the objectives of U.S. forces, and enlisted when the opportunity presented itself.¹⁹⁷

Another influx of recruits from Northeast Florida arrived in the spring of 1863. This rush of recruits coincided with another U.S. military expedition up the St. Johns

¹⁹⁶ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 16.

¹⁹⁷ Higginson, *Army Life In a Black Regiment*, 10; Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 74-75. For more information regarding the enlistment of Black soldiers in this area of the war see Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*; Lorien Foote, *Rites of Retaliation: Civilization, Soldiers, and Campaigns in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 43.

River, aimed at occupying Jacksonville. While white soldiers had comprised the two 1862 expeditions, this one featured two Black regiments, the 1st and 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiments. Unlike the earlier expeditions, this one had the explicit objective of assisting emancipation efforts and actively recruiting Black men into the army. Saxton wrote to Higginson with orders to “carry the proclamation of freedom to the enslaved,” and “to call all loyal men into the service of the United States.”¹⁹⁸ After capturing Jacksonville in March 1863, the expeditionary force occupied the city for about 19 days. During that period, the regiments actively recruited Black men from Jacksonville and the surrounding area, enlisting at least sixteen recruits from Northeast Florida in a short time. Had General Hunter not recalled the expedition or given it more time, Jacksonville could have become a center for emancipation and enlistment, as Fernandina did.¹⁹⁹

The day with the highest enlistments of Northeast Florida men occurred on June 13, 1863, in Fernandina. Unlike the other two instances of the temporary occupation of Jacksonville, the U.S. military maintained a continuous presence in Fernandina throughout most of the war. However, the U.S. military did not expand its recruiting operations in the port until June 1863, when it chose Fernandina to establish the 4th South Carolina Colored Regiment. On June 13th, approximately 31 men from Northeast Florida enlisted in the regiment, and numerous others from Georgia and other states also enlisted in Fernandina.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 99-100.

¹⁹⁹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 126; CMSR of soldiers from Northeast Florida; Daniel Shafer, “Florida History Online,” University of North Florida, 2019, <https://history.domains.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/projects-proj-b-p-html/cir-index-htm/>. For a more detailed discussion of the expedition and occupation of Jacksonville by the 1st and 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiments see Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*.

²⁰⁰ CMSR of soldiers from Northeast Florida.

By this point, the process for recruiting and enlisting Black soldiers had undergone significant revision and standardization under the War Department. Before the establishment of the Bureau of Colored Troops, following the issuance of General Order 143 by the War Department, recruiting efforts for Black soldiers ranged from recruiters sent by Northern states to help them fill their state quotas to individual white officers attempting to raise a regiment they could command. In both cases, problematic incentives undermined recruiting. Recruiters sent by the states often received their commissions based on the number of recruits they enlisted. The desire for money led to instances of state recruiters using false promises of bounties upon enlistment, attempting to forcibly conscript, or resorting to punishment. Similarly, questionable practices occurred among white officers, as their potential promotion or command depended on the number of recruits they could muster. The issuance of General Order 143 on May 22, 1863, in part sought to remedy these issues. Along with creating the Bureau of Colored Troops, the order standardized the recruitment and enlistment of Black soldiers by allowing only authorized and vetted War Department personnel to recruit Black soldiers. The order placed the establishment of recruiting stations and depots under the purview of the Adjutant General and detailed three or more field officers to act as inspectors, supervising the organization of Black troops.²⁰¹

In addition to standardizing the enlistment process, the military began employing various strategies to enhance recruiting efforts. In one effective technique, the military would use new enlistees to recruit newly free Blacks, family, or kin. The story of George Floyd demonstrates the success of such a strategy. Floyd, born on Talbot Island,

²⁰¹ OR, *General Orders, No. 143*, May 22, 1863, s. III, v. 3, 215-216.

enlisted in the 4th South Carolina Colored Regiment on June 13, 1863, in Fernandina. According to muster roll records, Floyd enlisted alongside another man from Talbot Island, Henry Houston. However, Houston's pension record indicates that Floyd recruited Houston to serve. Floyd must have demonstrated some ability as a recruiter, because he later served as a recruiting sergeant on multiple occasions in Fernandina and Jacksonville. The effectiveness of using Black soldiers, like Floyd, as recruiters stemmed from the impact of seeing another Black man in uniform. As historian Joseph Glatthaar writes, "nothing impressed fellow blacks like the sight of handsomely uniformed and fully armed black soldiers."²⁰²

These three recruiting waves demonstrate a strong link between military activity and Black recruitment. When the U.S. military sent expeditions or established recruiting stations in Northeast Florida, they found Black men eager to serve. While U.S. officials like Hunter sometimes expressed disappointment over the lack of Black enlistments, that disillusionment stemmed from unrealistic expectations and a misunderstanding of Black people's perspectives and agency. As Lorien Foote notes, "Hunter assumed that Black men wanted to fight for their freedom," and in doing so, they would flock to the army by the thousands. This line of thinking belies that military service provided the only means to 'fight for their freedom' for Blacks. However, in the complex wartime environment in which they found themselves, their individual experiences led them on different paths to the freedom they hoped to achieve. That so many in this area saw service in the U.S. military as their path raises questions about what recruitment

²⁰² Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 73; CMSR for George Floyd, Sergeant, Company A, 21st USCI; Henry Houston, Private. Company A, 21st USCI; Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

numbers might have looked like if military leaders had decided to permanently occupy Jacksonville, focused more explicitly on emancipation and recruitment, begun recruiting earlier, or used Black regiments to conduct regular expeditions deeper into Florida and Georgia to strengthen their ranks. Moreover, the later development of new strategies in place of earlier haphazard ones that leveraged newly enlisted Black soldiers or Black soldiers as recruiters raises justifiable speculation about the Army's lackluster recruiting efforts.²⁰³

The last bit of geographic information on some men's enlistment records, particularly those who enlisted later in the war, also noted the state credited with the recruit's enrollment. When February enlisted in September 1864, recruiters credited his enlistment to the state of Vermont. New York received credit for James Eulin's enlistment. John April, who enlisted after serving in the U.S. Navy, had his enlistment credited to Massachusetts. This practice of crediting the enlistment of a Black soldier to a Northern state placed Black soldiers and their recruitment across the country at the center of a significant political debate in the North. By the spring of 1863, much of the initial excitement about volunteering to join the army and fight in the war began to wane, especially as the U.S. army continued to suffer defeats and the number of dead and wounded soldiers rose. Facing a potential enlistment crisis and knowing that victory in the war would require more soldiers, Congress passed the Enrollment Act of 1863 on March 3, 1863. The act created a process in which states and congressional districts received quotas for the number of troops they needed to enroll. Failure to meet that quota would result in a draft until the required number of soldiers enrolled. This system

²⁰³ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 21; Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 61.

sparked a wide range of political debates and consternation over logistical questions and concerns about questionable recruiting practices as governors and localities faced increasing pressure and the threat of backlash. During the summer of 1863, New York City witnessed draft riots as citizens protested conscription. Some of the issues that quickly came to the forefront included questions of how the government would distribute the quotas across the various states and districts, who could be credited upon enrollment, how the length of service (1-year enrollments versus 3-year enrollments) counted toward the quota, whether the credit for a given district or town would be based on where the soldier lived, where they enlisted, or who paid the bounty for enlisting, and many other logistical matters. The governors of New York, Indiana, Illinois, and many other states sent complaints and requests for clarification on these and other issues to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and the Provost Marshal General, James Barnett Fry.²⁰⁴

For Black men enrolling, the issue became unique because under the newly created Bureau of Colored Troops, most Black recruits technically enrolled in a federal military unit, not a state one. As state governors clamored for ways to fill their quotas, many saw recruiting “colored” regiments as a way to ease their burden. Some governors even began sending recruiting agents into border states and refugee camps

²⁰⁴ CMSR for February Francis, Corporal, Company K, 21st USCI; CMSR for James Eulins, Corporal, Company F, 21st USCI; CMSR for John April, Private, Company F, 21st USCI; U.S. Congress, *An Act for Enrolling and Calling Out the National Forces, and for Other Purposes*, 12 Stat. 731 (March 3, 1863); *OR*, ser. 3, v. 1, 26, 28, 58, 70-71, 103-110, 560; Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 64. Some of the problematic recruiting practices that this act generated include states, towns, and districts sending recruiting agents to other areas to recruit to limit the number of men recruited in their area; towns and districts stopping recruiting efforts once they reached their quota or transferring excess recruits to other places; and the creation of “substitute broker” companies that would entice men through financial means to desert their current units, dress in civilians clothes, and go enroll in other states or districts. This is not a comprehensive list of questionable recruiting practices but rather a few prominent examples.

to find recruits. The Adjutant-General of Indiana complained to the War Department that “colored men are brought here as contrabands and then carried off to fill the quotas of other states.”²⁰⁵ The Governor of Kentucky complained that Black men enlisted in Kentucky but that the credit went to Massachusetts and Michigan, and he also expressed concern about the backlash he might receive from citizens of his state at the prospect of the state enlisting Black men. Recruitment for the 1st Iowa Colored Infantry, organized before the formation of the Bureau of Colored Troops, took place mainly in Missouri, but federal law permitted the enlistments to count toward Iowa’s quota.²⁰⁶

The role of Black soldiers within this quota system created a double-edged sword. On the one hand, state governors and recruiters turned to Black men to fill their quotas because, generally speaking, free and formerly enslaved Black men exhibited a willingness to serve. As previously mentioned, the United States Army saw relatively successful results when it established recruiting stations in places like Jacksonville and Fernandina. However, it also created a problematic scenario in which white Northerners warmed to Black enlistment because it meant their white men might avoid conscription. As one Northerner put it, “I only wish we had two hundred thousand Negroes in our army to save the valuable lives of white men...Public opinion in this respect is undergoing a radical change, and if they make good soldiers, why not let them fight?”²⁰⁷ Echoing such remarks, the Iowa governor stated, “when the war is over and we have summed up the entire loss of life it has imposed on the country I shall not have any

²⁰⁵ OR, ser. 3, v. 1, 560.

²⁰⁶ OR, ser. 3, v. 1, 573-574.

²⁰⁷ Quoted in Andrew T. Tremel, “The Union League, Black Leaders, and the Recruitment of Philadelphia’s African American Civil War Regiments,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 80, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 17.

regrets if it is found that a part of the dead are [n-words] and that all are not white men.”²⁰⁸ As seen with emancipation, what might seem, at face value as a positive step toward liberty and equality for Blacks could also highlight the limits of that freedom as it confronted the manifestations of racism and white supremacy that permeated much of the country.²⁰⁹

A key piece of demographic information uniquely important to Black soldiers and the trajectory of their military career came in the question about their prewar occupation. While this answer could affect any soldier’s military experience, regardless of race, it had a particularly strong impact on Black soldiers because it could put them on a path to promotion. Since the question aimed to identify individuals with useful skills or leadership potential, army commanders often saw those with unique jobs as ideal candidates for promotion to non-commissioned officer upon enlistment or during service. As Glatthaar noted, “officers sought black soldiers whom they could train to perform a variety of supervisory functions.”²¹⁰ Among the nearly 200 Black soldiers from Northeast Florida, about 25 percent listed pre-war occupations such as carpenter, boatman, lumberman, sawyer, sailor, teamster, mason, machinist, merchant, and many others. Since commanding officers typically regarded these occupations as “skilled labor,” these men had a significantly higher chance of receiving promotions. Of the nearly quarter of men who held skilled occupations, 44 percent received at least one

²⁰⁸ Quoted in James M. McPherson, *Freedom by the Sword: The U.S. Colored Troops, 1862–1867* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 234. The use of the ‘n-word’ in this paragraph comes from a direct quote by the Iowa governor. While there is an ongoing and rigorous debates about its use in academic writing, I deemed it appropriate to maintain historical accuracy to the original quote. Additionally, its use by the governor highlights the normalized racism accepted at the time by high-ranking politicians. The racial slur is omitted in this sentence due to the offensive nature of the term and since the term is not necessary to understand the larger point.

²⁰⁹ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 63.

²¹⁰ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 101.

promotion during military service. In contrast, only about 14 percent of those classified as unskilled laborers (field hand, farmer, yeoman, or laborer) received a promotion. These promotions, however, had limitations, as Black personnel could only become noncommissioned officers and rise to the ranks of corporal and sergeant. The greater opportunity for promotion, due in part to their prewar occupation and literacy, carried significant importance to the trajectory of their military experience, as it also offered opportunities for increased pay, leadership, and responsibility. Unfortunately, the hope for increased pay failed to come to fruition as promotions did not always equate to higher pay.²¹¹ Soldiers could also receive immediate promotions upon enlistment due to prior military service, whether official or unofficial. When February enlisted, he received the rank of corporal, most likely due to his previous two years of experience in the United States Navy.²¹²

Analyzing these pre-war occupations for the men from Northeast Florida presents some difficulties because recruiting officers often used occupations such as field hand, farmer, yeoman, or laborer as placeholders for men who came from enslavement and whom they perceived as having no specialized skills. Of the nearly 200 men from Northeast Florida who enlisted, approximately 70 percent listed one of these four occupations on their enlistment papers. Similarly, but less frequently,

²¹¹ CMSR of soldiers from Northeast Florida. Each USCI regiment required a group of noncommissioned officers consisting of a sergeant major, a quarter master sergeant, ten company first sergeants, twenty sergeants, and forty corporals. In White regiments, all NCOs above the rank of corporal received additional pay, up to \$21 a month for sergeant majors. Many times, these NCO positions required administrative work that led to the prioritization of soldiers who could read and write. As a result, literate Black soldiers frequently received promotions. Unfortunately, recruitment officers did not record whether a soldier was literate; however, for Black soldiers, the label 'skilled' could also indicate literacy. Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 53-54; "Military Pay during the Civil War," *American Battlefield Trust*, December 10, 2025, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/military-pay>.

²¹² CMSR for February Francis, Corporal, Company K, 21st USCI.

recruiting officers listed other occupations closely linked to enslavement and unskilled labor, including servant, waiter, and house servant. These perceived unskilled occupations likely carried a paternalistic, stereotypical perception among white officers. Even Colonel Thomas Higginson demonstrates the impact of these stereotypes and the paternalism they engendered in his descriptions of training the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment. His continual surprise at his Black soldiers' abilities and the demeaning language used in reference to them, at one point referring to them as "young Sambo," illustrates the pervasiveness of these stereotypes in the North and their ignorance as to the lived experiences of these men.²¹³

For the men from Florida in particular, labels such as field hand or laborer failed to do justice to the skills and abilities they likely possessed as a result of the unique system of slavery in Northeast Florida. In the first place, the region's small overall population meant that a "large majority of East Florida slaves resided in rural areas," where "approximately 87 percent of East Florida masters owned fewer than 20 slaves."²¹⁴ This lack of a large overall population, combined with the prevalence of small plantations, meant that many of these men came from plantations where they performed a variety of tasks. In addition to the smaller plantations, the widespread use of the Spanish task system and the common absenteeism of enslavers in Northeast Florida gave enslaved people time and opportunity to perform other duties and learn new skills. Under the task system of enslaved labor, enslaved people received daily tasks from their enslaver, and once completed, they had relative freedom to use the remaining time as they chose, including 'renting' their labor to others to obtain money. In

²¹³ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 13-15, 29-30, 32.

²¹⁴ Rivers, *Slavery in Florida*, 70-71.

the small, but growing, Northeast Florida towns that relied heavily on river transportation and port, enslaved workers “were often employed as general handymen, common workers, fishermen, farmers, draymen, and semi-skilled laborers,” all of which required the development of different skills among the enslaved.²¹⁵ Sergeant Henry McIntrye, a native of Palatka, Florida, rented out his labor as a builder and carpenter for eight years, even hiring out six other enslaved men from their masters to help build houses in the small Florida town of Micanopy. These unique realities of slavery in Florida, in some ways, explain the number and wide variety of skilled laborers who enlisted, but they also cast further doubt on the accuracy of such labels as “field worker, servant, or laborer.”²¹⁶

During enlistment, officers also recorded soldiers' complexions. Typically, officers classified the men from Northeast Florida as either “Black” or “dark.” However, nearly 20 percent of the men from Northeast Florida had “light,” “brown,” or “mulatto” listed on their enlistment papers. Higginson even noted, upon observing a group of Black men brought to Hilton Head from Fernandina, that they “average lighter complexion,” especially in comparison to the Black men from South Carolina, whom he remarked “there did not seem to be so much as a mulatto among them.”²¹⁷ On one occasion, Higginson dined with what he believed to be the white friends of one of his soldiers, Colonel Albert Sammis. Afterward, when Higginson remarked to Sammis about the dining experience, Sammis informed him that “one of those white friends of whom you

²¹⁵ Rivers, *Slavery in Florida*, 78.

²¹⁶ Seth Rogers, M.D., “War-Time Letters from Seth Rogers, M.D., Surgeon of the First South Carolina, Afterwards the Thirty-third U.S.C.T., 1862–1863,” *Florida History Online*, University of North Florida, accessed June 13, 2025, (<https://history.domains.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/projects-proj-b-p-html/cir-index-htm/war-time-letters-from-seth-rogers/>), February 12, 1863; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 48, 75; Fields-Black, *Combee*, 67-68; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 153. The details of the hire-out system could vary as the question of who hired out the labor, the enslaver or the enslaved, varied across time and place. Fields-Black, *Combee*, 58, 107-108.

²¹⁷ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 7, 10.

speak is a boy raised on one of my plantations; he travelled with me to the North, and passed for white, and he always keeps away from the negroes.”²¹⁸ Sammis himself came from an enslaved Black mother and the enslaver son-in-law of Zephaniah Kingsley, and had “light” listed in his enlistment records. Each of these mixed-race or “mulatto” soldiers indicated instances of interracial relations, often seriously problematic ones.

The relative prevalence of mixed-race soldiers from this region stems, in part, from Florida’s unique colonial history. The relatively recent work of historians such as Jennifer L. Morgan, Deborah Gray White, Stephanie M. H. Camp, Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, and others has reshaped the narrative about the prevalence of interracial relationships as a feature of antebellum slavery and the problematic nature of those relationships in general.²¹⁹ Antebellum Florida, particularly in the Northeast, stands as a prime example of the frequency and fraught character of these relations. Throughout much of its antebellum history, Northeast Florida functioned as a borderland that shifted between Spanish, British, and American control. With each change in colonial power came a shift in culture and societal norms. Especially under Spanish rule, Northeast Florida developed a unique set of customs regarding race. Unlike other parts of the South, where the rise of slavery became synonymous with the growth of a racialized

²¹⁸ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 28.

²¹⁹ See the following works from a detailed discussion regarding sexual violence under slavery: Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

society, these processes did not become as pronounced here because Spain had looser laws regarding manumission, granted free Blacks more legal and social rights, and, as historian Larry E. Rivers points out, “East Florida especially offered a climate of some toleration and flexibility.”²²⁰ That toleration and flexibility included miscegenation as the practice became common in parts of the state with strong Spanish influence. As Rivers notes, in 1850, out of a population of 39,310 enslaved people, about 2,780 had mixed racial origins. Including the free Black population, one out of every ten Black individuals had mixed ancestry. In 1860, that number had grown to 5,253 out of the 61,745 enslaved population, or 8.5 percent of the enslaved population.²²¹

The evidence for the commonality of miscegenation not only comes from the number of mixed-race individuals but also from the way many white enslavers who had Black mistresses or mixed-race children unabashedly showcased those relationships. As Rivers points out, “some white males who exploited black females in a sexual manner occupied the highest levels of power and wealth in East Florida.”²²² Men like Zephaniah Kingsley or Isaiah D. Hart faced little backlash for living with a Black woman. These men, and others, would also openly acknowledge their Black children in legal and public documents. Even after the United States seized the area and migrant enslavers in the territorial legislature began passing harsh Black codes, historian Canter Brown Jr. notes that these laws proved ineffective and difficult to enforce given the cultural climate and continued Spanish influence.²²³

²²⁰ Rivers, *Slavery in Florida*, 156.

²²¹ Rivers, *Slavery in Florida*, 153; Canter Brown Jr., “Race Relations in Territorial Florida, 1821–1845,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (1995), 291. According to the 1860 census, ‘mulattos’ made up 5.3 percent of the enslaved population of South Carolina, 7.9 percent of the enslaved population of Georgia, and 7.8 percent of the enslaved population of Alabama.

²²² Rivers, *Slavery in Florida*, 153-154.

²²³ Brown, “Race Relations in Territorial Florida,” 307.

Along with noting the prevalence of interracial relationships, these historians have highlighted the questionable and abusive nature of these relationships. Even in unique cases such as Zephaniah and his formerly enslaved Black wife, Anna Kingsley, where he had manumitted her and would entertain guests with his “coloured wife...at the head of the table, surrounded by handsome and happy children,” a clear imbalance of power in the relationship made consent all but impossible.²²⁴ As Rivers argues, “black women always found themselves forced by circumstances to act at least partly out of the need to protect themselves and their children.” In a compelling example, Rivers notes how an enslaver had developed a real affection for the Black woman he sexually exploited, while “she always hated him.”²²⁵ Therefore, it becomes imperative to recognize that the identifiers “light” or “mulatto” given to men like Sammis, Joseph Delk, Henry Houston, and others when they enlisted reflected the prevalence of the sexual exploitation and abuse of Black women by white men in a cultural environment where such actions received more tolerance due to an ambiguous racial understanding linked to the area’s strong Spanish heritage.²²⁶

Another seemingly innocuous demographic detail, the soldier’s age, likewise masks elements of a soldier’s past linked to the oppressive nature of antebellum slavery. Recruits from Northeast Florida ranged from young men in their early to late teens to older men. James Adams, the oldest recorded in the group, enlisted in the 1st South Carolina in 1862 at age 60. Unsurprisingly, Adams did not last long in the service,

²²⁴ Brown, “Race Relations in Territorial Florida,” 291.

²²⁵ Rivers, *Slavery in Florida*, 152, 157. For a detailed discussion of Zephaniah and Anna Kingsley see Schafer, *Anna Madgigine Jai Kingsley*.

²²⁶ CMSR for Henry Houston, Private, Company A, 21st USCI; CMSR for Albert Sammis, Private, Company C, 33rd USCI; Albert Sammis, Private, Company C, 33rd USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; CMSR for Joseph Delk, Private, Company I, 21st USCI; Uncle Mort, “Romance, History War and Tragedy,” *Apopka Chief*, May 13, 1926, 1,8.

receiving a discharge for old age and rheumatism within a year. Martin Dixon, from Indian River, Florida, became the youngest recruit at 13. Because of his young age, Dixon served as a drummer in the 33rd USCI. The documents give no hint as to how either of these men managed to enlist, given their respective ages, but the fact that they did enlist and serve may have resulted from a number of possibilities. Particularly early on in the war, many in the U.S. government, the military, and even the Northern public did not believe these Black men capable of serving in combat duty and saw the need for Black soldiers in relation to fatigue and garrison duty, especially as the U.S. military expanded its control over more and more Confederate territory. For Adams and Dixon, this meant their enlistment likely reflected a desire for additional laborers, not combat soldiers, especially as younger recruits tended to serve as drummers or musicians. Additionally, the possible desperation for recruits, combined with an enlistment process that lacked standardization, particularly early on in the war, led recruiting officers to overlook such information. On average, men from Northeast Florida who enlisted had an age of about 26 years old, which stands to reason, given that enslaved men of that age would likely have had greater capacity to escape slavery. However, the recorded ages of these men come with significant qualifiers, as any of these men likely did not know their exact age when asked that question by the recruiting officer.²²⁷

As slavery in the antebellum U.S. sought to destroy the individualism of enslaved Black people, enslavers often failed to record the birthdates of the children they

²²⁷ CMSR for James Adams, Private, Company C, 33rd USCI; CMSR for Martin Dixon, Private, Company C, 33rd USCI. "Fatigue duty," was a phrase used to describe noncombat duties ordinarily performed by soldiers. These duties consisted of, but were not limited to, construct fortifications, dig trenches, load and unload supply wagons and ships, and guard interior supply and railroad lines, Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 15, 82.

enslaved. As explained by a formerly enslaved woman, Jennie Hill, their age was something “very few of the remnant of slaves know.”²²⁸ At times, enslaved families would have a family Bible to record birthdates; however, because many enslavers and state laws forbade enslaved people from learning to read and write, such practices carried risk and left many unable to record such information in their own records. This lack of personal information caused significant trauma for many, including Charlotte Burris, who expressed her dismay when asked about her age. “That is what has grieved me a good deal. I can’t tell my age, to save my life. You know when children are separated from their parents early, they don’t know how old they are.”²²⁹ As noted by various historians, the age of an enslaved individual mattered only to their enslavers when that person ran away and the enslaver posted a descriptive ad in the newspaper, or when the enslaver desired to sell an individual and would frequently try to exaggerate or misrepresent the age of that enslaved individual.²³⁰

As a result of these practices, the age recorded at enlistment reflected either the recruit’s best estimate or that of the white officer. Occasionally, this led to multiple ages being recorded on military documents, similar to their place of birth. In some cases, the variance between the ages amounted to as little as a year. Henry White, from Jacksonville, enlisted in the 21st USCI and had ages of 17 and 18 listed in his military records. However, others had more significant discrepancies, as with Jacksonville native Norridge Gibson, who served in the 1st South Carolina and had ages of 20 and

²²⁸ Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 590.

²²⁹ Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 388.

²³⁰ For further discussion of the practice of changing ages as part of the domestic slave trade see Johnson, *Soul by Soul*; Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*; John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

26 listed. Jack Price from Duval County, Florida, had a twenty-one-year difference in his military records. As with other demographic information recorded in enlistment records, a deeper analysis of these men's ages reveals the harsh realities they faced up to that point in their lives. While enlisting in the U.S. Army represented a truly dramatic change in their lives, these seemingly basic pieces of information stand as stark reminders of the struggles they had overcome to get to that point.²³¹

The broad analysis of recruitment information from men from Northeast Florida also reveals the existence of familial and kinship networks and highlights the likely importance of those relationships in influencing these men's enlistment. Individual enlistment records provide no information on their motivations or whether kin persuaded urged their enrollment. However, by examining these records alongside pension records, the influence of family and kinship networks becomes clearer. For example, on June 13, 1863, brothers William and Frank Pappy enlisted together in the 4th South Carolina Regiment in Fernandina. They came from St. Augustine, where the Llambias family had enslaved them and their entire family, including three other brothers. The youngest brother, Antonio, initially tried to enlist with his brothers, but doctors denied his enlistment. Later, after the Battle of Olustee, Antonio's lifelong friend, Thomas Williams, recruited him into the same company as his brothers.²³²

²³¹ CMSR for Henry White, Private, Company K, 21st USCI; CMSR for Norridge Gibson, Private, Company G, 33rd USCI; CMSR for Jack Price, Corporal, Company D, 33rd USCI. As previously noted, some of these discrepancies could have resulted from the poor record-keeping practices by military officers, especially early on in the war. Even as the U.S. military adopted better standardized record-keeping practices, mistakes still occurred in many cases see page 25.

²³² CMSR for William Pappy, Private, Company A, 21st USCI; CMSR for Frank Pappy, Corporal, Company A, 21st USCI; CMSR for Antonio Pappy, Private, Company A, 21st USCI; Antonio Pappy, Private, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Familial influence extended beyond brothers joining together to include fathers and sons enlisting simultaneously. George Varness and his son, George Varness Jr., from St. Augustine, enlisted together on January 15, 1863, in the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment. James Bagley Jr.'s father had enlisted on December 2, 1862, in Port Royal, South Carolina. Almost half a year later, Bagley Jr. followed in his father's footsteps and enlisted in Company G of the 1st South Carolina Regiment, the same company as his father.²³³

These men's ability to enlist with blood relatives deserves further examination, as antebellum slavery, particularly in relation to the domestic slave trade, regularly led to the fracturing of enslaved families. Many historians have sought to quantify the number of family separations that occurred under slavery; however, those attempts have proven difficult given the many forms in which these separations could occur.²³⁴ As Peter Kolchin notes, family separations occurred when enslavers took children to serve in the plantation house, hired out enslaved laborers, moved enslaved laborers between plantations owned by the same enslaver, and as loans to creditors.²³⁵ Another significant source of separations resulted from sheriff sales when enslavers failed to pay taxes or debts. Local sheriffs would seize their property, including enslaved laborers, and sell them by auction at the courthouse. While the actual number of family separations under slavery remains a mystery, a consensus exists around three historical arguments. First, the prevalence of forced family separations did exist to the

²³³ CMSR for George Varness, Private, Company A, 33rd USCI; CMSR for George Varness Jr., Private, Company A, 33rd USCI; CMSR for James Bagley, Private, Company G, 33rd USCI; CMSR for James Bagley Jr., Private, Company G, 33rd USCI.

²³⁴ Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 90; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 125-126; Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*; Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

²³⁵ Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 125; Fields-Black, *Combee*, 58, 100, 104.

extent that it created a pervasive sense of threat and fear for enslaved families.²³⁶

Second, that among the many horrors of enslavement, forced family separations stood out as “the most brutal aspect of slavery.”²³⁷ Lastly, that even in those instances where enslavers showed concern for their enslaved, “the great majority of slaveholders chose business over sentiment and broke up families when under financial pressure.”²³⁸ The U.S. Army’s practice of organizing companies, Black and white, with men from a common geography created a common opportunity for men to enlist alongside family and kin. However, given the real and constant threat that families like the Pappys, Varnesses, and Bagleys faced, their enlistment and service alongside family members carried greater meaning and demonstrated the importance of family within Black communities, despite the many efforts to destroy those families.²³⁹

The father-son dynamic surrounding the Varnesses’ and Bagleys’ enlistment and service merits further discussion, as fathers had a complex role under enslavement. In many ways, slavery emasculated a husband and father, whether by depriving him of his role as the family’s provider of shelter and food, delegitimizing his marriage, reinforcing his powerlessness to protect his family as enslavers physically abused their wives and children, sold them or hired them out, or forced them to “choose between remaining silent while their wives and daughters were raped or seduced and risking death.”²⁴⁰

²³⁶ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 89; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 455; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 125; Fields-Black, *Combee*, 58.

²³⁷ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 89.

²³⁸ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 453; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 125.

²³⁹ “Notice of an impending sheriff’s sale of 7 enslaved persons,” *Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture*, Washington, D.C, https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2010.77.12; Thomas D. Russell, “Articles Sell Best Singly: The Disruption of Slave Families at Court Sales,” *Utah Law Review* 1996, no. 4 (1996), 1167.

²⁴⁰ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 490; Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 88; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 141; Eaves, *Sexual Violence and American Slavery*; White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*;

Additionally, enslaved husbands and fathers had a greater chance of self-emancipating, their enslaver hiring them out away from the plantation and their family, or being sold. The trauma and emasculation of these practices led some men to lash out at their wives and children; however, the frequent mention of fathers in spirituals provides evidence of the importance of fathers to enslaved children and families. For these two father-son duos, their likely strong father-son relationship influenced their decision to enlist together and provided an important sense of continuity amid the sea of change.²⁴¹

As a consequence of forced family separations during slavery and the detrimental effects on the families of the enslaved, many enslaved men, women, and children formed fictive kinship networks. These networks created familial bonds and obligations among enslaved individuals who had no blood relationship. These relationships existed between children on a plantation and adults, or between unrelated adults. Historian Herbert Gutman describes the formation of these networks as part of a pattern that encompassed the destruction of West African family and kin patterns during enslavement and the Atlantic slave trade, the initial creation of these symbolic kin groups, the solidification of fictive kin networks, and their continuity across generations. The creation of these networks demonstrates enslaved people's ability to adapt to enslavement. It represents an assertion of their agency as they sought to form group solidarity that would help them deal with the traumas of slavery, including the ever-present threat of family separation.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 483-485, 492; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 139, 141.

²⁴² Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 217-223.

Evidence for the existence of these antebellum fictive kinship networks exists among Black soldiers, particularly upon the examination of pension records. When Henry Houston and Stephen Wright enlisted in the 4th South Carolina Regiment on June 13, 1863, they did so partly at the request of George Floyd, the recruiting officer. Houston, Wright, and Floyd had grown up together on the Houston Plantation on Talbot Island. The fictive kinship bonds formed during their time enslaved together likely fostered bonds mirroring brotherhood and a sense of obligation to protect one another. Enlisting with fictive kin, or kin, also likely provided a sense of security and continuity as these men embarked on an experience that, in many ways, differed from anything they had ever encountered and posed a real threat of danger. Fictive kinship and kinship relationships existed for all soldiers, white or Black; however, as Gutman argues, “because slave society so constricted the associational life of slaves, it is probable that fictive kin were much more important devices for enlarging social relationships among slaves.”²⁴³

Although factors such as familial and kinship bonds influenced these men’s decision to enlist, what ultimately motivated men like Houston, Wright, Floyd, and the Pappy brothers to enlist remains difficult to pinpoint, particularly when compared with white soldiers. The recruiting officers did not record such details in the official records for any soldiers. Additionally, when pension agents interviewed and collected information for pension claims after the war, they rarely, if ever, asked why they chose to serve. Moreover, given the high illiteracy rates and the paucity of personal written

²⁴³ Henry Houston, Private, Company A, 33rd USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C; Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 223. See Fields-Black, *Combee* for an in-depth analysis on kinship networks along the South Carolina coast.

accounts among formerly enslaved men, their voice largely remains silent. However, their voices do appear at times, records of USCI officers, pension records, and in the actions of the men. As one Black soldier told Colonel Higginson, “I hav leff my wife in de land ob bondage, my little ones dy say ebry night, where is my fader?”²⁴⁴ Such thinking might have motivated John Quincy, from Palatka, Florida, who, during his service, persuaded his commanding officer, Colonel James Montgomery, to send him and a group of troops to Palatka so he could free his wife and child. For these men, military service offered the opportunity to achieve personal goals, such as returning to the plantations where they had lived and emancipating their wives, children, and relatives.²⁴⁵

Other personal and practical reasons motivated these Black men. Many recognized that enlistment offered immediate income through potential bounties and the hope of a steady income afterward. This income proved vital for the soldiers and their families. Eulins from Talbot Island, Florida, originally enlisted in the U.S. Navy after he and his mother escaped slavery on the Houston Plantation. His decision to enlist brought his mother, Pattie, to tears, as “he was her only support and took care of her in slavery times.” After his service in the Navy, Eulins enlisted in the 21st USCI on August 7, 1864, in Hilton Head, South Carolina. While stationed on Mt. Pleasant Island, James’ mother traveled from Fernandina to seek financial help from her son. According to James’ comrades, the harsh conditions she faced in Fernandina made such a risky

²⁴⁴ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 26.

²⁴⁵ John Quincy Adams, Private, Company G, 33rd USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; CSMR for John Quincy Adams, 33rd USCI; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 98; Fields-Black, *Combee*, 495-496.

journey necessary. Luckily, Eulins' military service provided him with the financial means to give her some money and promise to send additional funds in the future.²⁴⁶

Eulins' story also demonstrates the impact the decision to enlist could have on a man's family. While enlistment affected the families of all soldiers going off to war, for Black men, particularly those formerly enslaved, the tenuous circumstances of their families living in temporary or semi-permanent federal refugee camps, often wholly reliant on the federal government for food and supplies, magnified that impact. When Houston decided to enlist alongside his fictive kin, that decision carried the heavy burden of leaving behind a wife and child living in the federal refugee camp at Fernandina. These circumstances surely weighed on that soldier's mind and heart as he enlisted.²⁴⁷

Other Black soldiers viewed and understood their military service in a broader context, seeing it as a way to end slavery in the United States and improve the overall condition of their race. As one Black soldier said, "I believe da United States is fightin' for me and my people." Another Black soldier told Colonel Higginson, "our mas'rs de hab lib under de flag, de get dere wealth under it, and ebry ting beautiful for dere chil'en and under it dey hab grind us into money and put us in dere pocket; and dat minute dey tink date old flag mean freedom for us dey pull it down...but we'll nebber desert it boys, nebber."²⁴⁸ Such remarks suggest that, despite their often perceived ignorance, these soldiers understood the importance of the moment. As Glatthaar argues, "Blacks knew

²⁴⁶ James Eulins, Private, Company F, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

²⁴⁷ Henry Houston, Private, Company A, 33rd USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C. See Holly, A. Pinheiro Jr., *The Families' Civil War: Black Soldiers and the Fight for Racial Justice* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press) for an in-depth look at the consequences of military service for Black families, especially chapter 4.

²⁴⁸ Ash, *Firebrands of Liberty*, 36.

that to achieve genuine freedom they must somehow emasculate the power of racial prejudice, first by striking a blow at the institution of slavery and then by demonstrating to whites the folly of racism.”²⁴⁹ Many of these soldiers saw their service as an opportunity with deeper meaning for their country and, more importantly, for their race.

Similarly, a sense of pride and identity that came from wearing the uniform of the United States military drew others to enlist. Black soldiers shared this sense of pride in service with other soldiers, but the opportunity took on deeper meaning as these men began to see themselves as part of the United States, no longer the property of others but as citizens of the country. As one soldier remarked, “we’s Uncle Sam’s chil’n now; we’s none of your fiel’ hands.”²⁵⁰ One USCI officer noted, “new uniforms guns in their hands and the stamp of the government upon them seemed to give them self-respect and consciousness of manhood and power.”²⁵¹ Grasping the change and impact of putting on the uniform proves difficult, as many of these men from Northeast Florida had lived their entire lives under slavery and had escaped enslavement only months, weeks, or even days before enlisting.²⁵²

In many ways, the reasons that drove these Black men to enlist overlapped with those of white U.S. soldiers. Many in both groups had their motivation grounded in broad, abstract notions such as duty and honor. As James McPherson argues for Civil War soldiers in general, “duty and honor were indeed powerful motivating forces.”²⁵³ During the Victorian era in the United States, prevailing cultural norms linked these two

²⁴⁹ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 2.

²⁵⁰ Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 37.

²⁵¹ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 107-108.

²⁵² Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 79.

²⁵³ James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19. See also McPherson, *The Negro’s Civil War*.

concepts to the notion of masculinity. War offered young men a prime opportunity to test and assert their manhood. For Black soldiers, particularly those formerly enslaved, this opportunity carried additional weight, as they sought to assert their manhood after living under a system that frequently attempted to emasculate them. According to McPherson, these Black soldiers, free and formerly enslaved, “fought to prove their manhood in a society that prized courage as the hallmark of manhood.”²⁵⁴ However, the abstract nature of these two ideas allowed nuance in their meanings. While white U.S. soldiers saw it as their “duty” to fight for the continued union of their country, Black soldiers understood it as their “duty” to end slavery and achieve equality. Connected to these ideas of duty and manhood, some Blacks perhaps saw military service as a chance to avenge the oppression their people had suffered for generations or that they experienced individually. While southern whites and U.S. officers feared that those feelings of revenge would manifest in physical violence towards people, most Blacks sought to carry out violence on the physical remnants of slavery. Differences in motivations extended beyond the abstract to the practical and personal. As noted previously, many Black soldiers enlisted with the hope of using the opportunity to emancipate family and kin. The poor and unreliable pay still served as a significant pull factor for Black soldiers. While the true motivating factors for men like Houston and Christopher remain a mystery, the available evidence suggests they likely had more practical, personal, and nuanced reasons for enlisting.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁴ McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 33, 106; Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 164.

²⁵⁵ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 201; the next chapter will have a further discussion and examples of this topic. For further discussion of motivations for service, see McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*. McPherson’s work provides valuable insight into the motivations of Civil War soldiers from both sides generally, but only tangentially explores the motivations of Black soldiers. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, does explore the motivations of Black soldiers briefly. Kelly D. Mezurek, *For Their Own Cause: The 27th United States Colored Troops* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2016) provides the most in-depth

A common underlying thread among these motivations came from the opportunity that military service afforded these men to dramatically reshape their identities. Initially, such an idea might seem counterintuitive given the army's emphasis on conformity in appearance and actions. However, as these men enlisted and altered their physical appearance, they began a psychological transformation, one in which they shed the identity of enslavement and took on the identity of a soldier and freeman. After living under a system of oppression that attempted to remove their identity through many different means, they now had the opportunity to assert their agency and identity in new ways. While those serving in the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment found an eager ally in Colonel Higginson, the willingness of white officers to view and treat these Black soldiers with the dignity they merited varied greatly. Therefore, it becomes necessary to note the awareness that many of these men had in how enlistment could transform them. Whether they saw the service as a means to assert their manhood, to claim citizenship within the American body politic, or simply to shed the name of their enslaver or the label of enslaved person, the enlistment process represented a key moment for many of them in their process of self-discovery and expression.²⁵⁶

Another important part of the enlistment process came as the men underwent a medical examination to assess their fitness for service. While all U.S. military recruits

exploration of this topic, however, Mezurek's work is limited to the motivations of primarily free Black men. The Victorian Era, chronologically, spans the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901. However, the Victorian era describes much more than that. The era was marked by significant transformations due to industrialization, urbanization, and social changes in Great Britain and in the United States. Socially, the era emphasized strict moral codes and clear gender roles. For further reading about American Victorianism, see Daniel Walker Howe, "American Victorianism as a Culture," *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (December 1975); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982).

²⁵⁶ Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 97; Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 109; Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 50.

received these exams, evidence from the men of Northeast Florida highlights the structural racial inequalities that existed within the U.S. Army. An analysis of these men's service records reveals multiple instances of recruits who carried previous injuries, many of which likely stemmed from their harsh treatment while enslaved. Often, these injuries went overlooked or ignored initially as the recruit received approval for service, only to receive a discharge related to their previous injury a short time later. This trend appears most prominently in the early days of enlistment for the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment at the end of 1862. For example, Alfred Brown and Chauncy Jenkins, who enlisted in the 1st South Carolina on December 1862, both received disability discharges for injuries sustained prior to enlistment. In both instances, the Regimental doctor noted that they both had suffered broken legs that had not received proper treatment, resulting in incomplete bone union. Their broken legs not only led to their premature discharge but also affected their overall military service. Brown could not perform his duties as a soldier for 15 months, and officers had possibly relegated Jenkins to the role of company cook because of his injuries.²⁵⁷

No official records clearly explain why so many of these injuries went unnoticed. However, the unequal care for Black soldiers related to broader issues of racial discrimination within the U.S. Army throughout the war provides some insights. A major source for this unequal care came from the lack of trained physicians to serve as regimental surgeons. Since racial prejudice had prevented the creation of Black Regiments until later on in the war, these regiments had a smaller pool of physicians to draw from. Moreover, the surgeons they could find often lacked experience or would

²⁵⁷ CMSR for Alfred Brown, Private, Company F, 33rd USCI; CMSR for Private, Company H, Chauncy Jenkins, 33rd USCI.

work with Black soldiers reluctantly. Frequently, this reluctance stemmed from racial bias and ignorance. As Seth Rogers, surgeon for the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment, noted in a conversation with a fellow surgeon who held racially biased views, the man “seemed rather pleased in making the statement that their power of endurance was not equal to that of the whites.” Another USCT surgeon observed that “very few surgeons will do precisely the same for blacks as they would for whites.”²⁵⁸

Undoubtedly, this racial bias affected the medical care these soldiers received from white surgeons. Even surgeons who might not have harbored significant racial biases still had to contend with stereotypical and false beliefs about Blacks and their physical differences from whites. These differences included the belief that Blacks had immunity to certain diseases, like malaria, that impacted whites or that there existed a disparity in cranium and brain size between the races. Prominent physicians during the antebellum era in both the North and South spread the idea that Blacks had physical differences by dint of race that affected their medical care and made them medically inferior. Therefore, these men often underwent medical examinations performed by an ill-trained medical officer who had an ignorant perspective of Black bodies. The addition of abolitionist surgeons, like Seth Rogers and John Milton Hawks, and assistance from Northern missionaries, helped mitigate this issue for future enlistments.²⁵⁹

In addition to highlighting significant issues in the medical care of Black regiments, instances of men enlisting with pre-existing conditions underscore the harsh

²⁵⁸ Seth Rogers, “War-Time Letters From Seth Rogers,” February 8, 1863, April 4, 1863.

²⁵⁹ Seth Rogers, M.D., “War-Time Letters From Seth Rogers,” Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 191; Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery*, 8, 10, 14; Stephen C. Kenny, “‘A Dictate of Both Interest and Mercy’? Slave Hospitals in the Antebellum South,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 65, no. 1 (2010), 4; Humphreys, *Intensely Human*, 69.

realities of enslavement and the complexity of their medical care. As with Brown and Jenkins, who had suffered a broken leg while enslaved that never properly healed, many of these men carried evidence of the physical trauma they had endured while under enslavement; traumas that would continue to affect their well-being. Wallace Hunter presents the most poignant example of an injury likely linked to enslavement. Hunter, a native of Nassau County, Florida, received a disability discharge slightly over a year after enlisting in the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment. According to the surgeon who examined him, a gunshot wound to his loins had left him lame when he enlisted. The bullet had apparently gone through his back near the lumbar area, damaging his spinal cord and causing partial paralysis of his thigh and leg muscles. This injury prevented Hunter from performing any military duties since he enlisted. His service records do not make any statement regarding the shooting; however, given the frequent use of gun violence by enslavers as a means of intimidation or in response to enslaved resistance or emancipation, Hunter's injury could have come as a result of an attempted escape or act of resistance.²⁶⁰

Other men enlisted with other pre-existing injuries related to the brutality of slavery, albeit less traumatic than a gunshot wound. A number of recruits from Northeast Florida enlisted with hernias they had suffered while enslaved. Charles Gomes, who enlisted in December 1862, served just over six months before receiving a medical discharge for a double hernia. His disability certificate noted that his injury occurred seven years earlier while lifting lumber. Another soldier who enlisted in the

²⁶⁰ CMSR for Wallace Hunter, Private, Company I, 33rd Regiment; James M. Davidson, "Slaves with Guns in the American South: An Archaeological Assessment," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* (November 10, 2025), 4.

same month, Elias Lottery received his discharge a few months shy of his one-year mark. According to his discharge certificate, Lottery likely suffered the injury before his enlistment due to overexertion while performing extensive manual labor while enslaved.²⁶¹

For some soldiers, these pre-existing hernias had significant and detrimental affects to their military careers. George Moses, a native of Talbot Island, Florida, who enlisted on December 1, 1862, saw not only a premature end to his military service, but also suffered a demotion from corporal due to his inability to perform his duties. Moses had suffered a double oblique inguinal hernia before enlisting. As noted by historian Todd L. Savitt, the “hernia was a frequent cause of pain and of lost workdays among black male laborers.”²⁶² The long hours of strenuous physical labor took a toll on many of these men’s bodies.²⁶³

Moreover, what might have started as a minor injury could worsen without proper medical attention. Proper medical care could prove more difficult in rural areas, such as Florida during the antebellum era, where medical practice “was a matter of trial and error rather than of application of set procedures learned in medical school.”²⁶⁴ When enslaved individuals had access to medical professionals through their enslavers, they had to weigh the decision to seek such care against the potential undermining of medical independence that such a decision could entail. Savitt notes this dilemma for

²⁶¹ CMSR for Elias Lottery, Private, Company H, 33rd Regiment; CMSR for Charles Gomes, Private, Company G, 33rd Regiment.

²⁶² Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery*, 134.

²⁶³ CMSR for George Moses, 33rd Regiment; For further reading on the brutality of slavery see: Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019); Johnson, *Soul by Soul*.

²⁶⁴ Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery*, 17.

enslaved Blacks, as they could assert their agency by treating themselves or seeking assistance from other Blacks, which Savitt terms “Black medicine.” Turning to conjurers and other forms of Black medicine offered the opportunity “to exert some control over their lives.”²⁶⁵ However, as many enslavers disapproved of such practices, such attempts carried the risk of reprisal from their enslavers.²⁶⁶ On the other hand, receiving medical care from white medical professionals amounted to a “surrender of their bodies to their masters.”²⁶⁷ In this situation involving three parties—the enslaver, the enslaved, and the medical professional—the enslaver’s interests almost certainly took precedence. While at times enslavers showed seemingly genuine concern, financial concerns and the potential for diseases to spread to their families largely drove their decisions about their enslaved. In the case of men like Lottery and Moses, their lingering injuries could have resulted from not getting a doctor or their decision to self-treat, either as an assertion of agency or to avoid “the harsh prescriptions and remedies of the time.”²⁶⁸

As February enlisted in the United States military again, he provided the recruiting officer with seemingly mundane demographic information, including his name, age, place of birth, eye color, and complexion. Unbeknownst to the officer recording this information, each of these details offered rare and meaningful glimpses into the life of February, as it did to any of the men who enlisted. Behind each piece of data lies a story that offers significant insights into the lived experiences of enslaved people in

²⁶⁵ Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery*, 173.

²⁶⁶ Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery*, 149, 171, 173, 179.

²⁶⁷ Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery*, 150.

²⁶⁸ Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery*, 149, 150; Kenny, “A Dictate of Both Interest and Mercy”?, 9.

Florida and the antebellum South more broadly. The detailed analysis of the enlistment process at both the individual and group levels reveals the extent and limitations of these men's agency under slavery and after emancipation. It highlights the dramatic changes they faced in their environment, identity, and social relationships. Through all of this, a greater understanding and appreciation of the magnitude of the enlistment process and of what those records can reveal when placed within a broader historical context emerge. Not only would the decision to enlist in the U.S. forever reshape their futures, but it would also transform the meaning and nature of the Civil War.

Chapter 3: The Proving Ground

On a late January night in 1863, Robert Sutton once again found himself on the St. Marys River. The river had been a constant presence in Sutton's life. Born on the Alberti plantation on the Florida side of the river, Sutton grew to have an intimate knowledge of it. Before the war, Sutton had served as a pilot and guide on the river for numerous vessels. In 1862, he escaped slavery by traveling down this very river in a dugout canoe along the shoreline, eventually reaching the town of Fernandina. As joyous as he felt in reaching freedom, that freedom did not feel complete while his wife and child remained enslaved at the Alberti Plantation. At great risk, Sutton once again traveled along the St. Marys, returned to the Alberti plantation, and emancipated his wife and child. Then Sutton's life continued to undergo dramatic changes; not only did he and his family gain their freedom, but he also managed to travel to Hilton Head, South Carolina, and enlisted in the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment. His large stature (5 feet and 10 ½ inches), intelligence, and dedication had made an impression on his commander, Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and earned him a promotion to corporal. Having his commander's trust, Sutton used it to convince Higginson to take the regiment up the St. Marys on an expedition. Upon hearing that the army needed lumber, he eagerly told Higginson that he knew the location of a lumber road he had helped construct and of some lumber they could confiscate. He offered to serve as a guide, using the thorough knowledge of the river he had developed throughout his life. A previous expedition by a white regiment had returned empty-handed, claiming that all the lumber mills had been burned. Having worked as a lumberman in the area, Sutton promised Higginson more lumber than the ships could carry. His persuasions worked,

and now Sutton found himself once again on the St. Marys. However, this time he did not ride a small dugout canoe but rather stood at the bow of a United States gunship, guiding a Black regiment made up of predominantly newly freed men. His commander, Higginson, had received reports of possible enemy cavalry in the area. As Sutton's insistence and knowledge of the area had prompted this expedition, much of the operation's success rested on his soldiers. This would be the first time he and his fellow comrades in the 1st South Carolina would face their enemy on the field of battle. The success of this expedition would not only impact his life and the lives of his comrades, but if successful, this operation could represent a massive step in the fight against slavery and impact the recruitment of Black men across the country.²⁶⁹

Although the St. Mary's expedition constituted a small-scale operation, especially compared with the massive battles that have largely characterized the Civil War, it marked a major step in the military service of men like Robert Sutton. The expedition's results not only affected their lives individually but also had broader ramifications for Black recruitment across the country and for the war itself.²⁷⁰ These expeditions, along with another a few months later up the St. Johns River, represented the culmination of months of training and preparation to become soldiers. After the process of emancipation and enlistment, these men faced another transition: the social and mental transformation into soldiers. Their shift from enslaved individuals to soldiers represented a complex undertaking, as they navigated a myriad of changes and continuities from

²⁶⁹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 62-63, 70; CMSR for Robert Sutton, Corporal, 33rd Regiment; Stephen V. Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments That Changed the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 59-63.

²⁷⁰ Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 64-65.

lives under slavery. Analyzing this transition into a military environment highlights the unique military experience of formerly enslaved soldiers and demonstrates that their keen actions generally helped them successfully adapt to the military lifestyle while also finding space for cultural expression among pre-existing and newly created fictive kinship networks.²⁷¹ In both expeditions, the individual and collective initiative of these soldiers demonstrated the extent to which these once-enslaved men could influence U.S. military operations. By the end of spring 1863, after a few months of training, these men had successfully converted themselves into United States soldiers and undertaken two expeditions. Their success dramatically shifted the narratives surrounding Black participation in the war, demonstrating how the U.S. military could leverage their intimate knowledge of the landscape and how their achievements reshaped the war to mirror that of an enslaved revolt.²⁷²

The transition to becoming soldiers began quickly after enlisting, as the men received their uniforms and equipment. Quartermasters issued each man a dark blue dress coat, light blue trousers, an overcoat, two blue jackets, a blue forage cap with a black visor, and a pair of black shoes. Replacing their ill-fitting, hand-me-down shirts and pants—typical of enslaved individuals—with official uniforms gave these men a clear, tangible symbol of freedom and the changes they experienced. As historian Keith Wilson suggests, “Black soldiers were proud to wear the army uniform because it

²⁷¹ Fictive kin refers to familial relationships between individuals not linked by biology, adoption, or marriage. Scholars have used this idea to help examine Black families during and after enslavement, as it helps to frame the strong relationship established within communities and non-related individuals. See Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 140; Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 217–223; Pinheiro, *The Families’ Civil War*, 18–19.

²⁷² Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 200–202. For a discussion on the interaction of enslaved people with their environments and their development of geographical knowledge, see David Silkenat, *Scars on the Land: An Environmental History of Slavery in the American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

dramatically symbolized their change of status.”²⁷³ For these soldiers, the significance of these uniforms partly derives from how clothing had historically served as both a marker of enslavement and of status on Southern plantations. Enslavers typically gave enslaved individuals working as house servants nicer clothing than field workers to demonstrate their higher status and because house servants would encounter white guests more frequently. Enslavers worried about how the clothing of their house servants would negatively reflect them and provide ammo for slavery critics. With the nicer clothing came a sense of pride. The well-known formerly enslaved writer Louis Hughes noted how “I really felt light-hearted at this improvement in my personal appearance” when he received new clothes from his enslaver.²⁷⁴ The reception of clothing, even if the quartermaster did not give them the newest or best-quality uniforms, likely elicited a similar reaction from these men, as the new clothing imbued them with a sense of pride and helped them see themselves as soldiers.²⁷⁵

In addition to the uniform, another major sign of freedom came with the receipt of a firearm. Most Black soldiers received old smooth-bore muskets rather than the more accurate and effective standard-issue rifled muskets that white soldiers received. Due to racial discrimination from many within the department, Black soldiers received these discarded or second-rate weapons. However, despite receiving these inferior firearms,

²⁷³ Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom: The Camp Life of Black Soldiers During the Civil War* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002), 61.

²⁷⁴ John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 192; Bob Luke and John David Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom: How the Union Army Recruited, Trained, and Deployed the U.S. Colored Troops* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 92.

²⁷⁵ Quoted in Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 107-108; Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 6, 61; Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 116-117.

they carried significantly more meaning for Black soldiers than for white soldiers. As explained by Frederick Douglass in a speech given in Philadelphia on July 6, 1863, “let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket and there is no power on the earth or under the earth which can deny that he has earned the right of citizenship in the United States.”²⁷⁶ Or as one formerly enslaved man said upon enlisting and receiving his musket, “I felt like a man with a uniform on and a gun in my hand.”²⁷⁷ Far more than a simple weapon, these firearms held deeper meanings connected to gendered identities of manhood and citizenship. Due to a pervasive fear of enslaved revolts from the colonial period into the antebellum era in the South, white Southerners had a long history of passing strict gun laws in state and territorial legislatures that prohibited or significantly limited the ability of Black, free or enslaved, to carry or own a firearm.²⁷⁸

Notable examples of enslaved revolts like the Nate Turner revolt or John Brown’s failed raid on the federal armory at Harper’s Ferry many times led to backlash in the form of stricter gun laws. These laws, many of which violated the 2nd Amendment’s right to bare arms, intended to give whites a monopoly on firearms and allowed enslavers to use them “as instruments of intimidation or terror against Black bodies.”²⁷⁹ In Florida, these laws began during the British occupation of Florida from 1763 to 1783. During the second Spanish occupation after the American Revolution, the Spanish passed similar

²⁷⁶ Frederick Douglass, “Negroes and the National War Effort: An Address Delivered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on July 6, 1863,” *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. John W. Blassingame, vol. 3, *Series 1: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 596.

²⁷⁷ Quoted in Glathaar, *Forged in Battle*, 79.

²⁷⁸ Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 93; James M. Davidson, “Slaves with Guns in the American South: An Archaeological Assessment,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* (November 10, 2025).

²⁷⁹ Davidson, “Slaves with Guns in the American South: An Archaeological Assessment,” 4.

laws. Shortly after Florida became a U.S. territory, the territorial legislature passed a law in 1824 that prohibited any enslaved person to “use, carry, or keep any fire arms, ammunition, or any offensive weapon.” The statute also prescribed a punishment of lashes, “not exceeding thirty nine,” for any enslaved person in violation of the law.²⁸⁰ Therefore, from a government and political standpoint, these men had no right or ability to carry guns and faced legal and physical danger when using or carrying any weapon throughout their lives. These circumstances led many of the men to take great care in cleaning and maintaining their weapons.²⁸¹

However, as observed with Florida’s anti-miscegenation laws, there existed a disconnect between legal statutes and the realities on the ground. Archeologist James M. Davidson argues that despite these strict gun laws, archeological evidence from slave cabins and plantations, including the Kingsley Plantation on Fort George Island, shows that enslaved people had much more frequent access to firearms than historians have previously believed. While Kingsley’s relatively progressive racial views and history of attacks on his properties might provide a unique explanation for the presence of this archeological evidence, Davidson’s analysis of other plantations corroborates narratives of enslaved individuals using guns and suggests a more nuanced understanding of this moment as they became soldiers. While they might have had more experience with firearms than previously thought, that experience came either through the acquiescence of their enslaver or through illicit means. The fact that they received a gun they owned, at least while in the service, and could openly carry and use

²⁸⁰ Quoted in Davidson, “Slaves with Guns in the American South,” 6.

²⁸¹ Davidson, “Slaves with Guns in the American South,” 5-6; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 24.

in violent conflict against white men constituted a momentous occasion for many of these men, and one that carried the threat of physical danger to themselves. As one U.S. officer observed, having “new uniforms, guns in their hands, and the stamp of the government upon them seemed to give them self-respect and consciousness of manhood and power.”²⁸² With their own firearms, these Black men could now fight and protect their newfound freedom.²⁸³

As they entered the regimental camp and the small tents that would serve as their home for the next few months, these men entered a new world that offered them “an opportunity to discover the limits of their freedom and to assert their claims on citizenship.”²⁸⁴ A clear and tangible similarity between army life and plantation life appeared in the camp’s physical layout. Adjacent to the parade ground, enlisted men had their tents arranged in a row, grouped by assigned company. Next came a row of kitchens and the tents of the company officers’ servants. Behind those lay the company commander’s and field officers’ tents. At the rear of the camp lay the quartermaster’s and sutler’s tents, the hospital, stables, and ordnance stores. The camp’s layout separated officers and enlisted men to prevent fraternization and reinforce officers’ authority. For Black regiments, the camp structure carried a unique weight given the overt racial divide. As Wilson notes, “A soldier traveling from the parade ground to the chaplain’s tent would move from one racial community into another.”²⁸⁵ This physical

²⁸² Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 107-108.

²⁸³ Davidson, “Slaves with Guns in the American South”; Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 79; for more discussion on the role of guns in slavery see Antwain K. Hunter, *A Precarious Balance: Firearms, Race, and Community in North Carolina, 1715–1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2025). Generally speaking, Black soldiers receiving firearms from the military was not unique to the Civil War as a few Black regiments fought in the American Revolution. However, from an individual standpoint, this moment had tremendous significance.

²⁸⁴ Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 14.

²⁸⁵ Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 9-10.

separation of races and the assertion of authority reflected similar practices in plantation communities.²⁸⁶

Having their tents and living quarters located away from those of their officers, but still in close enough distance for observation, paralleled the physical layout of their living quarters while enslaved. Generally, the separation of races existed on plantations where the enslaver's main plantation house featured prominently at the top of a hill or at the end of an avenue, separated from the enslaved people's quarters but close enough that they could observe from a distance. Near the main house typically lay the kitchens, barns, and the overseer's house. The placement of the overseer's house allowed them to more easily observe the enslaved people. Enslavers commonly kept the enslaved people's quarters separate from these buildings, either along parallel roads or in a semi-circular arrangement.²⁸⁷

The Kingsley Plantation along the St. Johns River in Northeast Florida offers a clear example of this physical layout and its underlying significance. The main house of the Kingsley Plantation stood at the end of the only street leading in and out, with the enslaved quarters arranged in a semicircle in front of it. Historian Daniel Shaffer suggests that this semicircular arrangement may have mirrored the style of a Senegalese village and came at the behest of Zephaniah's formerly enslaved wife, Anna. Eighteenth-century Wolof villages used this type of spatial organization to show "deference to male authority...with the focal point of the village community being the

²⁸⁶ Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 8-10, 14.

²⁸⁷ For further reading into the purposeful layout of plantations and its impact on the enslaved see Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), Ch. 4; John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), Ch. 1; Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*, 117-126.

dwelling of the master or headman at the north end.”²⁸⁸ Therefore, the Kingsleys adopted this African cultural tradition to reinforce their authority and gain social control. Not all plantations adopted the same semicircle layout used by Kingsley; however, all enslavers had a purpose in setting up the layout of the plantations as they did. They wanted their enslaved to never exit their homes without gazing upon the enslaver’s dwelling. Although the army camps these men entered differed significantly from the plantations where they grew up, the physical orientation of the camps served a similar purpose of separation, asserting authority, and social control.²⁸⁹

However, as with the plantation, that physical separation offered tangible benefits, granting the men a degree of independence. While enslavers shaped the physical landscape of their plantations to their own benefit, enslaved people quickly learned to use that same landscape to carve out space where they could assert some degree of agency and autonomy. Commonly, enslaved individuals sought to keep their cabins or slave quarters as far from the main plantation house as possible. As Wilson argues, “they knew that their independence grew as the distance from the owner’s mansion increased.” As these men entered this new military camp environment, “this desire for privacy did not disappear.”²⁹⁰ Just as enslaved individuals used that separation to form and strengthen kinship ties, engage in religious worship, and develop or maintain cultural traditions, Black soldiers used that space similarly to create a relative degree of autonomy. That space became a vital aspect of their experience

²⁸⁸ Amani T. Marshall, *The Enslaved Communities on Fort George Island: A Special History Study for Timucuan Ecological & Historic Preserve* (Atlanta: National Park Service, 2021), 38; Daniel L. Schafer, *Zephaniah Kingsley Jr. and the Atlantic World: Slave Trader, Plantation Owner, Emancipator* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013), 164.

²⁸⁹ Marshall, *The Enslaved Communities on Fort George Island*, 36-39; Schafer, *Zephaniah Kingsley Jr. and the Atlantic World*, 164.

²⁹⁰ Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 11.

wherein they explored the social and political boundaries of their exercise of agency as they navigated a complex environment of change and continuity.²⁹¹

Their use of this space to assert their freedom became most apparent at night, after hours of drill and dress parade, which usually ended around 8 pm. The men generally had about an hour before lights out. In general, the transition to a government schedule present potential issues for the formerly enslaved as they now had to learn how to manage their time by the hour. For Northeast Florida men, and those from the Sea Islands, this change proved even more dramatic as they likely grew up on plantations using the task system of labor. Under the task system, enslaved individuals received daily assignments that, once they completed to the enslaver's or overseer's desire, they had the remainder of the day to cultivate their own gardens, craft items, or engage in other activities that could supplement their rations or which they could then sell in the market. As enslaved Kingsley Gibbs noted that during some days in the summer, "the hand is generally done his task by 2 pm, often sooner, so they have an abundance of time to work their own crop, fish &c."²⁹² The task system granted the enslaved more time for themselves and autonomy. For many of these men, adapting to

²⁹¹ Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 11; Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 154; Stephanie M. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), Ch. 1; Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 162; Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 3-4; Dale W. Tomich, Rafael de Bivar Marquese, Carlos Venegas Fornias, and Reinaldo Funes Monzote, *Reconstruction the Landscapes of Slavery: A Visual History of the Plantation in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

²⁹² Jacqueline K. Fretwell, *Kingsley Beatty Gibbs and His Journal of 1840-1843* (St. Augustine Historical Society, 1984), 21, quoted in Marshall, *The Enslaved Communities on Fort George Island*, 27.

the military meant a loss of that autonomy and a reduction in the amount and control of personal time.²⁹³

Although brief, that hour held great significance for all soldiers, especially for these Black soldiers. “What the soldiers did in their off-duty hours, around the campfire or in the privacy of their tents, shaped their military experience just as much as drill and combat duty; for here, the soldiers had an opportunity to create their own world.”²⁹⁴ Sitting around the campfires, these soldiers fostered a sense of community and camaraderie by sharing life stories, telling jokes, and engaging in a variety of other conversations. Colonel Higginson often crossed the camp’s racial and social boundaries to observe his men during their nighttime downtime. On one occasion during the night while still in the early weeks of the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment’s training, Higginson came across a group of soldiers sitting around the fire. One of the soldiers told the tale of his daring escape from slavery. The animated, dramatic way the soldier told his story captivated the audience, including Higginson.²⁹⁵ Little did Higginson know that these men had grown up engaging in this communal experience around the campfire during their downtime on the plantation. In an environment where the vast majority of the enslaved people could not read or write, storytelling and oral histories carried significant importance. Particularly in the telling of stories and folktales, these

²⁹³ Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 31-32; Larry Eugene Rivers, *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 68-69; William Dusinger, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000); Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 153, 164, 166. The origins of the task system in Northeast Florida come from the Spanish and the migration of South Carolina and Georgia planters, where it was also prevalent. Kolchin further notes how the increased autonomy and isolation due to the prevalence of the task system on Sea Island plantations allowed for the continuation of African cultural practices and the creation of the Gullah Geechee people, Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 75.

²⁹⁴ Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 60

²⁹⁵ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 11-13.

experiences had allowed the enslaved to express the frustrations they had held inside throughout their long days of work, pass on survival strategies, or tell stories that invoked a sense of hope. In other words, the tradition of sitting around the campfire telling stories helped the enslaved cope and proves that “the rigors of bondage did not crush the slave’s creative energies.”²⁹⁶ Additionally, as noted by Wilson, storytellers acted as cultural mediators as they shared “the collective folk wisdom of the slave community” across generations.²⁹⁷ Therefore, it comes as no surprise that these men would carry forth such a vital cultural practice.²⁹⁸

Other times, particularly at night, Higginson saw his men cleaning their guns, practicing drills, playing music, smoking tobacco, and engaging in their unique form of religious worship at night. Using this downtime to build individual and community identity and to continue cultural heritage practices demonstrated continuity with how many of them likely spent their off hours while enslaved. Much like they had in the past, the soldiers “used their leisure time to relax, express their personalities, and develop their culture.” Within a military camp, this “helped them to creatively interact with their new environment.”²⁹⁹

As Higginson observed his soldiers, particularly during their off hours, he quickly noticed that they would rapidly switch from a more “grave and sedate[d]” demeanor after completing drills or a dress parade. “The moment they are dismissed from drill, every tongue is relaxed and every ivory tooth visible.”³⁰⁰ This ability to effectively

²⁹⁶ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 59.

²⁹⁷ Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 72-73.

²⁹⁸ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 57-60; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 154-155.

²⁹⁹ Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 60-61; Joyner, *Down By the Riverside*; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Leslie Howard Owns, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

³⁰⁰ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 11.

change their attitude helped these men demonstrate the necessary solemnity and discipline during drills, fatigue duty, and guard duty, while also allowing them to experience freedom and social connections when away from military duties. In some ways, this sharp sense of situational awareness, in which these soldiers could successfully adjust their behavior to their environment, mirrored a similar behavioral aptitude that enslaved individuals developed to improve their circumstances on the plantation. While humans, in general, learn to adapt to their surroundings to some degree to succeed or survive, these men grew up in a situation with much higher risks and severe, or even deadly, consequences. Developing and using this ability while enslaved had major implications for their ability to create and sustain semi-autonomous spaces or to survive.³⁰¹

At times, the white officers viewed this behavioral modification as a habit of deference, a concern that worried many, including Higginson, who “believed that habits of servile obedience were a significant obstacle to military training.”³⁰² Other white officers believed that the docility or deferential demeanor of Black soldiers, learned during enslavement, allowed them to learn drill easily but “hindered the black recruit’s development as a soldier.”³⁰³ However, this view stemmed from a flawed perception and stereotype held by many in the North that slavery had instilled in the enslaved “a habitual if not instinctive dread of the white man as an opposing force.”³⁰⁴ The “Sambo” stereotype became so pervasive in Southern antebellum literature that it became entrenched in the minds of many Northerners as well. When Higginson traveled to

³⁰¹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 11; Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 134-136.

³⁰² Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 19.

³⁰³ Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 103.

³⁰⁴ Quoted in Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 103.

South Carolina to train and lead the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment, he brought with him an expectation of his men's behavior based on this stereotype.³⁰⁵

However, as Blassingame and others argue, the idea of the Sambo functioned as a mask for the enslaved people's internal resistance and white Southerners' paranoid fears. Blassingame correctly points out, "the docility of the slave was a sham, a mask to hide his true feelings and personality traits."³⁰⁶ As explained by noted formerly enslaved author Israel Campbell, "I knew that the best way to get around master was to be very humble."³⁰⁷ Within this quote by Campbell lies evidence of the enslaved's adaptability and agency, as they shaped their behavior to assuage or even influence their enslavers. For white Southerners, the Sambo cliché masked their persistent fear of violent revolts by their enslaved. Recognizing their distress and anxiety over this threat of violence would also amount to a tacit acknowledgment of the limits of their power and the harshness of slavery. While the military environment differed markedly from the plantation, their "long tradition of masking their true feelings and attitudes by adopting roles that appeared appropriate for particular circumstances...continued to operate, in varying degrees, in the Union Army."³⁰⁸ These survival and coping mechanisms helped

³⁰⁵ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*; Hawks, *A Woman Doctor's Civil War: The Diary of Esther Hill Hawks*, ed. Gerald Schwartz (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1984), 36-37; Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 134-139; Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp: An African American Women's Civil War Memoir*, (Published by the Author, 1902), 9; Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 161-163; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 45; Holly A Pinheiro Jr., *The Families' Civil War: Black Soldiers and the Fight for Racial Justice* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2022), Ch. 1; Carole Emberton, "Only Murder Makes Men: Honor, Manhood, and Violence in the South," *Journal of Southern History* 77, no. 4 (November 2011), 375.

³⁰⁶ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 201.

³⁰⁷ Israel Campbell, *An Autobiography: Bond and Free; or, Yearnings for Freedom, from My Green Briar House: Being the Story of My Life in Bondage, and My Life in Freedom* (Philadelphia: Published by the author, 1861), 62.

³⁰⁸ Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 143-144.

these men demonstrate themselves as generally more than capable of handling and succeeding in a military environment.³⁰⁹

Among the various activities these men engaged in during their free time from drill, fatigue, or guard duty, few offered a stronger sense of continuity, community, or optimism than religious services. Religion proved so critical to his troops that Higginson took detailed notes on their religious practices and worship during the early months of the regiment's training. One night in early December, Higginson described the scenes around the camp as he observed what the soldiers called a "shout." The men gathered inside a hut made of palm leaves around a campfire. Enthusiastically, they sang one of "their quaint, monotonous, endless, negro-Methodist chants."³¹⁰

"I can't stay behind, my Lord, I can't stay behind!
O, my father is gone, my father is gone
My father is gone into heaven, my Lord:
I can't stay behind!
Dere's room enough, room enough,
Room enough in de heaven for de sojer:
Can't stay behind!"³¹¹

Typical of these shouts, as Higginson wrote, the "excitement spreads: inside and outside the enclosure men begin to quiver and dance, others join, a circle forms, winding monotonously round some one in the centre."³¹² During one of these shouts, the soldiers grabbed a barrel and called on those in the crowd to come forward to preach or lead the group in a song or chant. On another occasion, one of the soldiers prayed out loud saying:

³⁰⁹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 11, 53; Hawks, *A Woman Doctor's Civil War*, 36; Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 95; see also James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Camp, *Closer to Freedom*.

³¹⁰ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 17.

³¹¹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 22.

³¹² Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 17.

let me so lib dat I shall have manners, dat I shall know what to say when I see my heavenly Lord. Let me lib wid de musket in one hand an' de Bible in de oder,—dat if I die at de muzzle ob de musket, die in de water, die on de land, I may know I hab de brssed Jese in my hand, an' hab no fear. I have lef' my wife in de land o'bondage; my little ones dey say eb'ry night, Whar is my fader? But when I die, when de bressed mornin' rises, when I shall stan' in de slory, wid one foot on de water an' one foot on de land, den, O lord, I shall see my wife an' my little chil'en once more.³¹³

The rhythmic drumming of feet and the clapping of hands accompanied these chants, hymns, and prayers. For many Black soldiers, participation in these religious services continued the religious practices that had evolved to serve them while enslaved. As Blassingame contends, “the slave found some hope of escape from the brutalities of his daily life in conventional religion.”³¹⁴ These ‘shouts’ that Higginson observed reflected a deeper history and a conscious and intentional action among these Black men to carry forth and carve out space for the continuation of these practices that had served to imbue them with hope or a spiritual connection to the divine.³¹⁵

The history of religion among enslaved individuals in Florida, like other Southern states, draws on centuries of development reaching back to the early colonial era. As enslaved men and women came to the Americas, they brought their African religious traditions and practices. These religious practices included varying forms of Christianity, Islam, or more commonly, indigenous rituals and beliefs. Over time, to varying degrees, these indigenous practices came into contact with Christianity. Particularly with the isolated environment and disproportionate enslaved population on the Sea Islands, the

³¹³ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 26.

³¹⁴ Blassingame, *Slave Community*, 59-60.

³¹⁵ Higginson, *Army Life*, 17-18, 22, 26; Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 127-146; Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 60-75; Hawks, *A Woman Doctor's Civil War*, 39-40. Not all religious expression and worship followed this energetic manner, as “in other parts of the camp the soberest prayers and exhortations are proceeding sedately.”

retention of African-indigenous practices became a prominent feature of religious practices. This encounter grew more pronounced over the years as enslavers became more accepting of missionaries and preachers who taught Christianity to their enslaved, particularly when such teaching centered on the themes of 'obedience to thy master' and submission. However, as historians have argued, the distinct religious practices of Black Americans, such as shouts and spirituals, emerged as enslaved men and women maintained or adapted features of Christianity and created their own ideas and practices, often drawing on the African cultural and religious traditions passed down from generation to generation. This blending created, as posited by Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, "the continuation and the adaption of West and West Central African beliefs and rituals in the shaping of various New World religious cultures." Religious cultures, particularly for enslaved Blacks in the American South, characterized by their "active agency...in their own religious transformation."³¹⁶ As Pollitzer notes for the Gullah people specifically, "no practice is more meaningful in the life of the sea-island people...and better reflects the synthesis of an ancient heritage with the culture imposed by the masters than religion."³¹⁷

³¹⁶ Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), xii.

³¹⁷ Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, 134, 143; Larry Eugene Rivers, *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 108, 115; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 145; Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 128-129; Hawks, *A Woman Doctor's Civil War*, 37. For further discussion on the development of Christianity among the enslaved people of the American South see also Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

Moreover, the creation of this distinct brand of Christianity proved vital to enslaved men and women's ability to cope with the horrors of enslavement. Religious worship provided avenues for community building, the exercise of responsibility and leadership, and the release of pent-up emotions. In the lyrics of their spirituals, enslaved people expressed their hopes, sorrows, and frustrations. As Frederick Douglass once remarked, "the songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart."³¹⁸ The frequent references to freedom, family, and deliverance from bondage produced a "defense against personal degradation" that, for many enslaved, proved more powerful than the fear of the enslaver's authority.³¹⁹

The power these men drew from their religious practices stayed with them as they transitioned into the military, serving "as an agent of group unity and social cohesion" and providing additional meaning to their service individually.³²⁰ For one Florida man in particular, Thomas Long, religion and a divine purpose served as foundational elements of his life and military service. Born into slavery around 1841 in Duval County, Florida, Long escaped early in the war and at one point lived for a time in the federal refugee camp at Fernandina. He enlisted in the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment on November 11, 1862, in Port Royal, South Carolina. Soon after enlisting, Long impressed his commanding officer enough to receive his first promotion to Corporal. The regiment's surgeon, Seth Rogers, described Long as a "thin, spiritual-looking, unassuming black man, who trusts God."³²¹ During his service, Long's strong religious devotion led him to serve as the acting Chaplain of the regiment. In one of his

³¹⁸ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 68.

³¹⁹ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 74, 76.

³²⁰ Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 128-129.

³²¹ Rogers, *Letters from Seth Rogers*, March 25, 1863.

sermons, he preached that “if each one of us was a praying man, it appears to me that we could fight as well with prayers as with bullets...for if God says I shall say, I will not be harmed. Hell may roll with all its indignation of wrath & I shall be safe.” On another occasion, Long led the company in prayer.

We come a chosen people & seek thy blessing. May our hearts be filled with love divine, like our dear Jesus—wilt thou look down in mercy upon us in our great baptism of suffering...we pray, O lord, that we may be permitted to visit our friends in the Slavery land & deliver them from slavery chains & bring them into the way of freedom.³²²

As shown by these sermons and prayers, Long’s religious beliefs shaped his military service as a divine mission, and the faith he expressed gave him the energy and his service a deeper meaning. Moreover, Long’s influence through his religiosity continued a trend during the era of enslavement, when Black preachers became the “focal points for slave religion.”³²³

The prominent role of music and song for these men extended beyond religious practices. These men continued to use secular music, developed as a resource to cope with the hardships they faced under enslavement, in their transition to soldiers and during their military service. After a particularly tough night on picket duty, a group of men from the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment returned to camp soaked from the rain, joyfully singing the popular tune “Hangman Jonny.” Additionally, secular music served as a source of relaxation, cultural and social continuity, camaraderie, accommodation, and resistance. The men expressed these themes through the lyrics they sang, such as the lyrics Higginson overheard in November 1863:

Ten dollars a month

³²² Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, ed. Christopher Looby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 132, 205.

³²³ CSMR for Thomas Long, 33rd USCI; Rivers, *Slavery in Florida*, 120.

Tree ob dat for clothing!
Gwine to Washington
To fight for Linkum's darter.³²⁴

These lyrics reference the disparity in pay that existed between white and Black soldiers, as Black soldiers throughout much of the war received less pay (\$10), with three dollars going back to the government for their uniforms.³²⁵ Weaving grievances into lyrics to vent or express resistance helped the men endure their struggles in their new military environment. As Wilson notes, "music was a vital element in black culture. On the slave plantation it had enriched the texture of life and acted as an important vehicle for survival. In the army, it served a similar function."³²⁶ On plantations, secular songs "served as rhythmic accompaniments to labor" and gave enslaved people a space to express their feelings and desires. For soldiers, music provided an important continuity that "eased his transition to freedom and citizenship."³²⁷

While Higginson and other white officers assumed they observed religious and cultural practices common across southern plantations, they actually witnessed the distinct culture of the Gullah people. A combination of geographic isolation, high population of Blacks as a percentage of the overall population, an illegal slave trade that brought enslaved people directly from Africa into the region later than other areas of the United States, and the frequent absenteeism of enslavers, fostered the creation of a unique Creole culture on these Atlantic sea islands over more than a century of enslavement. In their observations of language, spirituals, music, and other cultural

³²⁴ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 252.

³²⁵ Further discussion of this racial discrimination in payment practices between Black and white soldiers is discussed in Chapter 4.

³²⁶ Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 148.

³²⁷ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 56.

practices, white officers saw the manifestations of these people's ability to retain their African identity and culture in the creation of a unique cultural identity in perhaps the strongest example of the power of enslaved agency. As argued by William Pollitzer, "nowhere else in the United States did the African heritage of body and mind persist more than in these sea islands."³²⁸ Engaging in these cultural practices while living in military camps provided a crucial sense of continuity for these men and allowed them to carry their ancestors' cultural heritage forward into a new post-slavery world.³²⁹

The complex interplay of change and continuity these men experienced as they entered the military environment carried over into their training to become soldiers. For Civil War soldiers, much of that training involved hours of drills on a strict schedule. Typically, the day began at 5:00 am with reveille and morning roll call. After an hour for breakfast and camp chores, the soldiers spent the next four hours or so drilling. Around noon, the men ate lunch and perhaps performed fatigue or guard duty. In the afternoon, they returned to more drilling and a dress parade before dinner. The men spent their first few months of service focused mainly on drilling. Through this training, they learned to execute marching commands and battlefield maneuvers in unison. Commanders stressed the precise execution of these commands and maneuvers because they could decide the outcome of any given engagement.³³⁰

³²⁸ William S. Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 12.

³²⁹ Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, 8, 9, 35, 51, 134, 143, 164; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 48, 75, 150; Melissa L. Cooper, *Making Gullah: A History of Sapelo Islanders, Race, and the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Mason Crum, *Gullah: Negro Life in the Carolina Sea Islands* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968); Betty M. Kuyk, *African Vices in the African American Heritage* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003); Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, Ch. 6.

³³⁰ Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 102; Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 99-100.

Besides this strict and extensive training routine, Black soldiers also faced increased external pressure during training. The presence of newspaper correspondents from prominent Northern newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, publicized the training of these Black soldiers to the Northern public. This attention from government officials, the northern public, and their white comrades heightened scrutiny of their training process. Colonel Higginson observed that the “whole demeanor of this particular regiment was watched with microscopic scrutiny by friends and foes...a single miniature Bull Run, a stampede of desertions, and it would have been all over with us.”³³¹ Like Higginson, these men understood that their service had wider consequences. To earn the respect of their white comrades, politicians, or the public in general, they needed to perform well on the battlefield, “and the best means to prepare for that moment came through the numerous hours of drill.”³³²

Along with marching and learning maneuvers, the men spent hours practicing rifle drills. These drills had the men lining up in three rows, one behind the other. On command from an officer, the soldiers would take turns loading, aiming, and firing their weapons. Ideally, each row could maneuver and fire three shots in sixty seconds. To increase the pressure of the drill, training officers would fire their pistols into the air while shouting at the soldiers.³³³

As in the camp environment, the daily routine of drilling brought drastic changes for the soldiers, along with areas where they adjusted more easily. Overall, the

³³¹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 5.

³³² Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 100; For further reading on the *New York Times*’ coverage of the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment see Richard A. Martin, “The New York Times Views Civil War Jacksonville,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (April 1975).

³³³ Luke and Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom*, 104.

experience of following the commands of a white man had strong similarities to their time during slavery, albeit not to the extent for these men from the Sea Islands. This training under the careful watch of a white officer constituted another significant change for the men of Northeast Florida and the Sea Islands specifically. Due to the high rate of absenteeism by enslavers in these areas, many of those enslaved on Sea Island plantations enjoyed a greater degree of separation from their white enslavers and, at times, their overseers. Additionally, this frequent absenteeism allowed enslaved men to rise to the rank of driver or foreman. Thus, these men not only faced a new situation where they found themselves under much closer supervision, but also that monitoring came from white authority. The military life resembled more characteristics of the gang system of enslaved labor, more so than the task system that these men had lived under. Despite these differences, knowing how to modify their behavior and demeanor in the face of authority helped them quickly accept orders and respond to drill commands, so much so that Higginson noted that these Black soldiers “can be driven with a looser rein than my former one, for they restrain themselves.”³³⁴ The men from Northeast Florida, in particular, made a distinct impression on Higginson. “They take readily to drill...they are not especially dull or inattentive; they seem to fully understand the importance of the contest, and of their share in it.”³³⁵ Far from passive, ignorant men shaped by the commands of their officers, these soldiers had an awareness of the potential of the opportunity before them and cleverly used their agency to seize it.³³⁶

³³⁴ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 11.

³³⁵ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 15.

³³⁶ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 244; Seth Rogers, M.D., “War-Time Letters From Seth Rogers, M.D.,” February 13, 1863. The gang system of enslaved labor typically entailed sunrise-to-sunset labor that was heavily supervised. The rigid structure of the gang system gave few opportunities for autonomy than the task system.

For the men who enlisted in the fall of 1862, a celebration marking the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation on New Year's Day 1863 capped off their strenuous months of training. To mark this historic moment, General Saxton and other U.S. Army officials organized a large celebration at the Army camp on Port Royal Island. Black and white residents, along with refugees, attended the event alongside military officials, government representatives, and soldiers. As part of the festivities, the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment marched through Beaufort's streets in a military parade. Men like Robert Sutton and Thomas Long, who had been enslaved on plantations just months earlier, now marched in full U.S. Army uniform. After the parade, Dr. W. H. Brisband, a former enslaver turned abolitionist, read the proclamation aloud to a crowd of Black and white soldiers and citizens. When he finished, Colonel Higginson stepped onto the stage to accept the new regimental colors, crafted and sent by Northern abolitionists. As Higginson held and waved the flag before the crowd, an elderly Black man and two Black women spontaneously broke into song. Soon, much of the crowd, including the soldiers of the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment, joined in singing "My country, tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing!" When some white spectators on the stage began to sing, Higginson motioned for silence. He later described the moment as "anything so electric, it made all other words cheap...art could not have dreamed of a tribute to the day of jubilee that should be so affecting." "While mere spectators stood in silence, waiting for my stupid words, these simple souls burst out in their lay, as if they were by their own hearths at home."³³⁷ After the impromptu singing, Higginson presented the colors to Sergeant Prince Rivers and Corporal Sutton. Following a few

³³⁷ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 40-41.

remarks from each, other guests spoke, and the regiment sang “Marching Along” and “John Brown’s Body” before moving on to the feast.³³⁸

Underneath the emotions and patriotism of this event lies the irony of these men, who months earlier, through their own actions, had freed themselves and now, in US Army uniforms, celebrated a presidential proclamation that declared them and thousands of others “free.” Even Colonel Higginson noted this irony: that “those in this Department are nominally free already.”³³⁹ In this region, as in other parts of the war, Blacks had already emancipated themselves in large numbers by this point and, through their collective efforts, had moved the debate beyond emancipation and enlistment. Men formerly enslaved in the 1st South Carolina Regiment had gone beyond dreams of emancipation and had already made significant strides in the social and psychological process of becoming soldiers. For these men and women, the Emancipation Proclamation did not drastically change the reality on the ground. However, it held significant meaning because it represented recognition and legitimization from the U.S. government that the abolition of slavery now stood as a primary war goal. It also officially approved the recruitment of Black men into the U.S. military. In total, while the Emancipation Proclamation did little to alter the daily lives of these men and women, it symbolized the culmination of their influence on the conflict through their individual and collective efforts and stands as a remarkable testimony to their agency and courage. For the first time in their lives, these men could feel themselves as part of the United States. Unlike in previous occasions, as poignantly

³³⁸Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 39-42; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, Ch. 1; Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 18; Hawks, *A Woman Doctor’s Civil War*, 41-42.

³³⁹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 38.

observed by Frederick Douglass in his famous speech given during a July 4th celebration in 1852, that “this Fourth of July is yours, not more,” this Emancipation Day celebration gave the Black soldiers and free people in attendance a celebration that was just as much theirs as anyone else’s.³⁴⁰

The day after the celebration, the men of the 1st South Carolina returned to the more mundane routines of military life. Underlying this routine of training, there permeated a strong desire among the men to prove themselves in the field of battle. While some in the regiment had the opportunity to participate in small-scale raids along the Georgia coast in November, the large majority of the men still had not had the opportunity to actively participate. As Higginson pointed out, “of one thing I am sure, that their best qualities will be wasted by merely keeping them for garrison duty.”³⁴¹ Higginson’s view likely mirrored the desire of many of these men to fight and prove themselves as soldiers. Despite their success in training, they understood that a major step toward putting to rest the doubts held by many in the United States military, government, and the public at large came through proving themselves on the field of battle. Additionally, now that the Emancipation Proclamation had made the ending of slavery an objective of the conflict, they wanted to use their military training to strike blows at the institution that had enslaved and taken so much from them and, in some cases, continued to subjugate family and kin.³⁴²

³⁴⁰ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 38; Ashe, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 13-15; Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the 4th of July?” in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1999), 188–206.

³⁴¹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 56; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 89; General Order No. 1, 25 November 1862, Order Book, 33rd USCT Infantry, Regimental Records, RG 94, National Archives, Washington D.C.

³⁴² Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 63; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 40-41.

By the end of January 1863, the men of the 1st South Carolina would finally get their chance. At a meeting on January 21st, General Hunter, once again in command of the Department of the South, along with General Saxton, approved the plan to use the 1st South Carolina in an expedition along the Southern Atlantic coast. Shortly after arriving in South Carolina, Higginson had anxiously pondered seeking an opportunity to participate in a raid similar to those some in his regiment had engaged in back in November and had even received an offer to do so. However, well aware of the attention his regiment received from the outside, Higginson waited until he felt them ready. After just a few months of training, the men had demonstrated their ability to the extent that Higginson accepted the offer, stating, "it is all we wish for now."³⁴³ Hunter granted permission to Saxton and Higginson to send the 1st South Carolina on an expedition along the coast. The ultimate location of that expedition came through the influence of, Corporal Robert Sutton. The Florida man had quickly impressed his commanding officer with his keen intellect, as Higginson remarked, "not yet grounded even in the spelling-book, his modes of thought were nevertheless strong, lucid, and accurate...his comprehension of the problem of Slavery was more thorough and far-reaching than that of any Abolitionist."³⁴⁴ Sutton had repeatedly implored Higginson to mount an expedition up the St. Marys River. The St. Marys River, which empties into the Atlantic Ocean near Fernandina and Fort Clinch, forms part of the border between Georgia and Florida. Like many rivers along the South Atlantic Coast, the St. Marys is a meandering river with foliage along its banks, ever-shifting sandbars, and a number of plantations and small towns along its edge. Having lived along the river his entire life,

³⁴³ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 61.

³⁴⁴ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 62. Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 57.

used it to escape slavery, and then returned to emancipate his wife and child, Sutton confidently volunteered to guide the expedition.³⁴⁵

Based on the results and reports of prior expeditions by U.S. forces, many wondered if such an expedition would produce any tangible benefits as “the mills were all burned.”³⁴⁶ Sutton, however, persuaded Higginson to go up the St. Marys by offering him “more lumber than we had transportation to carry.”³⁴⁷ While enslaved, Sutton had worked as a lumberman and pilot on the St. Marys River. Drawing on that experience, Sutton knew the location of lumber roads he had helped construct that the previous expedition had likely missed. Sutton used this knowledge and the trust he had earned from Higginson to influence the location of the largest expedition by Black troops to date in the war. Not only did Sutton put himself at great risk by volunteering to lead the expedition, but he also potentially staked the future of Black soldiers on his and his comrades' success.³⁴⁸

Armed with the local knowledge of soldiers within their ranks and backed by the Department's high command, the 1st South Carolina, along with three United States vessels, set out from Beaufort on January 23, 1863.³⁴⁹ After arriving in Fernandina on the 24th, Higginson decided to launch a small, makeshift expedition to engage a company of Confederate cavalry, once again at the behest of Corporal Sutton. Setting

³⁴⁵ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 63; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 57-58.

³⁴⁶ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 64; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 59.

³⁴⁷ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 64; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 58.

³⁴⁸ Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 58-59.

³⁴⁹ One of the three ships in this expedition was the famed *U.S.S. Planter*. The same ship that formerly enslaved Robert Smalls commandeered as part of his and others' escape from slavery on May 13, 1862. For more details on the story of Robert Smalls, see Fields-Black, *Combee*, 214-217; Cate Lineberry, *Be Free or Die: The Amazing Story of Robert Smalls' Escape from Slavery to Union Hero*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017).

out late on the 24th, Higginson ordered his men to disembark just below the Township Landing, where he believed the Confederates had their camp. Sutton and a small force went ahead to scout, using an old lumber road that Sutton had helped construct, and returned with a local enslaved man Sutton had found who had just come from the Confederate camp. After informing the man about the Emancipation Proclamation, he agreed to serve as a guide. Placing the Florida company at the head of the column, the force of about 100 men set out. Sutton and his newly found guide marched alongside Higginson. As the group quietly made its way toward the Confederate camp, only the coughing of the men, the peeping of frogs, and the barking of a dog broke the silence of that night. The dog, in particular, made Sutton uneasy, as enslavers commonly used them to search for runaways. After about two miles of marching, the men heard the sound of galloping horses in the road ahead, followed by the order “charge!” After some initial confusion, the 1st South Carolina opened fire on the attacking Confederates, and some even began charging the cavalry. Higginson could not recall how long the engagement lasted, but after some time the Confederate cavalry retreated deeper into the woods. As morning broke and Higginson and his men accounted for their wounded, he could not help but praise his men for their composure and discipline under fire. Perhaps recognizing the experience as a relatively minor affair compared to other battles of the war, Higginson nonetheless saw tremendous significance in it. “It had given us all an opportunity to test each other, and our abstract surmises were changed into positive knowledge.”³⁵⁰ The men of the 1st South Carolina, after a brief period of training, had engaged the enemy and emerged victorious. For their part, the soldiers

³⁵⁰ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 74.

expressed a desire to continue after the Confederate cavalry. Sutton, in particular, wanted to press forward despite receiving three wounds during the engagement, one to his skull that came close to killing him. Sutton had not reported his injuries and only saw the surgeon after officers ordered him to do so. Along with Sutton, “another did not report at all, but kept all night on guard” despite a buckshot injury to his shoulder.³⁵¹

After this engagement, the men of the 1st South Carolina faced a new challenge in their service. Not a challenge of combat, but rather a trial born of public perception and racial prejudice within the US military, the federal government, and the northern public. As Higginson explained, “for the first time, my officers and men found themselves in possession of an enemy’s abode.” The men had proved their ability as soldiers in battle; now they had to prove the same soldierly discipline in dealing with Confederate citizens and towns. Higginson, along with many other USCT officers, government officials, and Southern whites, questioned whether these Black soldiers, most of them formerly enslaved, would resist the urge to exact violent retribution on Confederates or their towns.³⁵²

As with their first experience under enemy fire, the men of the 1st South Carolina conducted themselves admirably, such that their steadfast discipline cannot be overstated. The white citizens they encountered on this raid, and in future expeditions like the one to occupy Jacksonville later that year, made the task difficult. On multiple occasions, white citizens, frequently women, would insult, swear, and attempt to

³⁵¹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 64, 73-74, 77; Seth Rogers, “Letters from Seth Rogers,” Jan. 27, 1863; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 59-60.

³⁵² Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 77; Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 201; Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 43-44; see also George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

verbally demean the Black soldiers. Higginson observed that the sight of these formerly enslaved individuals, now armed, wearing the uniform of the United States Army, and standing before them “was the last crowning humiliation” for many Southern whites.³⁵³ In some instances, the men faced their former enslavers. Sutton had such an experience when he encountered his former enslaver during this time. After returning to Fernandina with the wounded and confiscated lumber, Higginson received a report of a brickyard further up the St. Marys, where they could confiscate a store of bricks to assist in the continued construction of Fort Clinch. Higginson jumped at this opportunity because he knew that Sutton lived near the brickyard, located near Woodstock, Sutton’s former home, and that he could continue to rely on Sutton’s intimate knowledge of the river and landscape. In the early morning of January 29, an expedition led by Sutton and Higginson set out once again up the St. Marys and reached Woodstock by that morning.³⁵⁴

By late morning, Higginson and Sutton stood before Mrs. Alberti, Sutton’s former enslaver. Higginson observed that during this encounter, the “unutterable indignation that came over the face of my hostess, as she slowly recognized him.”³⁵⁵ Despite her attempts to convince them that she and her husband had treated the individuals they enslaved well and even tried to educate them, Sutton informed his officers of the falsehood of these statements. The fact that Sutton could contradict his former enslaver and be believed highlighted the remarkable and rapid change in his life. As Rogers noted, “the statement of a black man was lawful in Dixie.” Moreover, Sutton further

³⁵³ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 109.

³⁵⁴ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 86, 109, 111; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 61-62, 64.

³⁵⁵ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 86.

demonstrated his authority in front of his former enslaver by ordering his men to shoot anyone who attempted to leave the house without his permission. Such a role reversal in authority and the use of violence encapsulates the dramatic transformation in Sutton's life and the world around him.³⁵⁶

Beyond the insults and mistreatment from Southern whites, the men of the 1st South Carolina also encountered other reminders of their past lives that could have easily provoked anger and possibly justified violent retribution. While in Woodstock, Sutton and some of the other men showed Higginson and the USCI officers the village's slave jail. Upon seeing the stocks, including some designed by enslavers to hold women and children, and a machine "so contrived that a person once imprisoned in it could neither sit, stand, nor lie," Higginson recalled feeling "unutterable loathing" as he left.³⁵⁷ For him, the jail represented the horrors of slavery, which had existed mostly as an abstraction until then. Unfortunately, written records do not exist to capture the impressions soldiers, like Sutton, had upon seeing these reminders of slavery. Soldiers likely experienced similar, if not even more profound, emotions when, in Jacksonville a few months later, two of them pointed out to Higginson the very spot where white Southerners had lynched their brothers.³⁵⁸

In another instance that could have sparked anger and violence during this expedition, Higginson noticed the pianos, china, glassware, and other luxury items in some of the plantation houses along the river's shores, and his men "knew that their

³⁵⁶ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 86-87; Seth Rogers, "Letters from Seth Rogers," Jan. 30, 1861; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 62; Hawks, *A Woman Doctor's Civil War*, 43.

³⁵⁷ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 87; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 62-63.

³⁵⁸ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 87, 109; Hawks, *A Woman Doctor's Civil War*, 43.

own labor had earned for their masters.”³⁵⁹ Seeing this luxury reminded Higginson of the wives and children of these men who slept on the ground in Federal camps at Beaufort or Fernandina. Acknowledging these reminders of their past lives provides poignant examples of the trauma these men confronted and the mental fortitude they demonstrated in their discipline. This did not mean that these men did not jump at the opportunity to get some form of retribution when ordered, as Higginson noticed when he observed the “zest with which the men finally set fire to the house at my order.”³⁶⁰

Ultimately, the raid resulted in a resounding success for the 1st South Carolina. Not only did the regiment successfully confiscate a significant amount of lumber, food, livestock, and bricks, but it also engaged and repelled a company of Confederate cavalry and managed to free a small number of enslaved individuals. As the 1st South Carolina returned downriver to Fernandina, it faced Confederate fire from the various bluffs overlooking the river. While under fire, the men once again demonstrated their composure and eagerness to fight. Higginson noted that after he had ordered the men below the ship deck, they fought each other for places at the open portholes so they could fire back. Corporal Sutton once again demonstrated his eagerness by firing from the boat’s pilot house while a comrade re loaded for him.³⁶¹

In addition to achieving the expedition’s original goals, the expedition proved vital in solidifying the men’s confidence as soldiers and in contributing to ongoing changes in the perception of Black troops among their own officers and the public. Rogers expressed at the end of the expedition, “we have had our soldiers three times under fire

³⁵⁹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 85; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 62-64.

³⁶⁰ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 78; Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 55.

³⁶¹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 82, 91; Rogers, “Letters from Seth Rogers,” Jan. 30, 1963; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 64-65.

and know that they only care to face the enemy. We know also, that they can be trusted with the conquered foe.”³⁶² The *New York Times* published a report on the expedition and praised the 1st South Carolina, saying, “our colored troops are more than a match for any equal number of white rebels which can be brought against them.”³⁶³

From a military operational perspective, the St. Marys expedition stood as a clear demonstration of the impact of proactive action by Black soldiers, such as Sutton, and the critical importance of using the local knowledge of the men. Dr. Rogers, in recounting the experience, noted that “the marshes, or savannahs, in this part of the country, which border the rivers, are almost impassible for human beings, yet many a slave has waded through them toward the north star of freedom.”³⁶⁴ Sutton successfully served as a guide for the expedition, and his unique knowledge of the river enabled them to travel at night and navigate it safely. Higginson credited the success of the operation to his soldiers and, in particular, to Sutton, saying in the *New York Times*: “Everything, even to the piloting of the vessel, and the selection of the proper points for cannonading, was done by my own soldiers; indeed, the real conductor of the whole expedition...was Corporal Robert Sutton...In every instance where I followed his advice the predicted result followed.”³⁶⁵ Not only did the soldiers of the 1st South Carolina prove invaluable in this expedition, but local Blacks also provided valuable knowledge. Higginson learned of the Confederate casualties from their engagement only through a local Black man who had passed by the scene and later reported the seven dead

³⁶² Rogers, *Letters of Seth Rogers*, Jan. 31, 1863.

³⁶³ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 94; *New York Times*, Feb. 10, 1863; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 64-65

³⁶⁴ Rogers, *Letters from Seth Rogers*, February 1, 1863.

³⁶⁵ Quoted in Martin, “The New York Times Views Civil War Jacksonville,” 416; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 65.

Confederates. Higginson later remarked that “so obvious, too, was the value, during this raid, of their local knowledge...that it was impossible not to find in its successes new suggestions for the war.”³⁶⁶

These “new suggestions for the war” led the Department of the South’s high command to give these Black soldiers another opportunity to prove their abilities on a larger scale. Not long after returning to Beaufort, Higginson met with the Department’s high command, including General Hunter and Saxton. The meeting centered on the city of Jacksonville, Florida. United States forces had already occupied the city on two separate occasions. Hunter explained that previous evacuations of the town came because “a garrison of five thousand was needed to hold the place, and that this force could not be spared.”³⁶⁷ However, now, some six months later, Hunter and many officials believed that the Confederacy had withdrawn many of its forces from the area. In addition, the actions of the Black soldiers during the St. Marys expedition had convinced the commanders of “the advantage possessed by colored troops, in local knowledge, and in the confidence of the loyal blacks.”³⁶⁸ On these grounds, Hunter and Higginson agreed on another expedition, this time taking a brigade of around 1,000 men up the St. Johns to retake and hold Jacksonville. If successful, commanders hoped that Jacksonville could serve as a stronghold for Unionists in the region and help bring Florida back into the United States.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁶ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 82-96; Rogers, “Letters from Seth Rogers,” Jan. 39, 1863, Feb. 1, 1863.

³⁶⁷ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 98; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 84.

³⁶⁸ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 98; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 84-85.

³⁶⁹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 98; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 85-86.

Officially, the order received by Higginson listed his main objectives as: carrying the “proclamation of freedom to the enslaved,” calling all loyal men to the service of the United States, occupying as much of Florida as possible, and weakening and harassing Confederate forces in the area.³⁷⁰ These orders, in many ways, reflected the strategic vision Hunter had expressed earlier in the war and shared by Higginson, and they highlighted the dramatic change in the nature of the war. Such an order six or so months earlier would have likely received rebuke by the U.S. military and federal government. The St. Johns expedition represented an opportunity to use these new Black regiments to attack slavery in the South, to use those regiments in an assault on a southern city with the intent to occupy that city, to free enslaved individuals, and bolster the ranks of the Department with those newly freed people. In many ways, this expedition mirrored earlier attempts by enslaved people to revolt, as they planned to use the prospect of emancipation to both undermine slavery and grow their forces. However, now with the support of the United States military, this expedition to achieve what previous revolts never could.³⁷¹

Colonel James Montgomery and his newly formed 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiment joined Higginson and the 1st on this expedition. The 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiment arrived in Beaufort, both raw and not yet armed. Their commander, Montgomery, came from an abolitionist background. However, Montgomery’s history and participation in Bleeding Kansas led him to adopt a more aggressive approach to

³⁷⁰ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 99-100.

³⁷¹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 99-100; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 86. For works on previous enslaved revolts in the United States see Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1943); Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner’s Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Tony Horwitz, *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid That Sparked the Civil War* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2011).

the destruction of slavery. Montgomery received authorization to organize a colored regiment in January 1863. Like the 1st South Carolina, the 2nd consisted of Black men, the majority of whom had previously been enslaved, from South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Montgomery had even spent time in Key West, Florida, recruiting some one hundred and thirty refugees from the federal contraband camps in that area, including some from Northeast Florida. Benjamin Williams, born in Duval County, Florida, enlisted in Montgomery's regiment on February 16th. The day before, George Garvin from St. Augustine, Florida, and Jeff Houston from Fernandina, Florida, had enlisted as well. Historical documentation provides little insight into how these men came to enlist in Key West, a place far from their birthplaces. Moreover, recruiting officers at the time of their enlistment and pension agents later on rarely concerned themselves with such matters. Their enlistment records demonstrate the extent to which Black people in Northeast Florida used the U.S. Navy to make their way to other areas, such as Beaufort and even as far south as Key West, or the extent of the domestic slave trade.³⁷²

On March 5, 1863, the two regiments departed Beaufort and headed for Jacksonville. As the men learned of their objective, the St. Johns River and Jacksonville, Higginson recalled that "our Florida men were wild with delight" and that upon seeing the city "all discipline was merged, for the moment, in a buzz of ecstasy."³⁷³ Many of the men had left the area six months or more earlier, seeking freedom and a new life. Now they returned as free men, armed and wearing the uniform of the United

³⁷² Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 58; CMSR for Benjamin Williams, Sergeant, 34th Regiment; CMSR for George Garvin, 1st Sergeant, 34th Regiment; CMSR for James Houston, private, 34th Regiment; William Lee Apthorp, "Montgomery's Raids in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina," ed. Daniel L. Schafer, Apthorp Family Papers, 1741-1964, M89F, Historical Museum of Southern Florida, Miami, Florida, accessed through *Florida History Online*, Digital History Project by the University of North Florida, <https://history.domains.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/projects-proj-b-p-html/montgomery-index-html/>.

³⁷³ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 104.

States Army. Some of the men might have had thoughts similar to John Quincy's. Quincy had escaped enslavement in Palatka, Florida, but had done so without his wife and children. This expedition offered him the possibility of returning to Palatka and freeing his family.³⁷⁴

The expedition encountered delays due to one of the ships falling behind and the difficulty of navigating the St. Johns River's ever-changing sandbars. Eventually, after crossing the sandbars and traveling up the St. Johns River through the night, the four U.S. vessels—*John Adams*, *Burnside*, *Uncas*, and *Boston*—carrying the two regiments of Black soldiers reached Jacksonville on March 10. As the regiments disembarked, they neither saw nor encountered any Confederate forces. Instead of enemy soldiers, they saw children playing on the city's wharves, a handful of men walking through the streets, and a few women observing the U.S. naval vessels from their doorways. Their hope of surprising the Confederate Authority had come to fruition, and the U.S. military once again occupied Jacksonville.³⁷⁵

Not long after their arrival and occupation of the city, Higginson began to realize the precarious situation he and the two regiments faced. Although they had yet to face the enemy, their limited numbers, as a large portion of the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment remained at Beaufort due to illness and Montgomery had less than 150 soldiers, combined with a lack of knowledge about the number of enemy forces, left them in a vulnerable position. Conversely, the Confederates had ample opportunity to observe the U.S. Army and Navy forces from the woods and bluffs around Jacksonville and along the St. Johns River. In addition to this lack of information on the enemy

³⁷⁴ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 97-104; Ash, *Firebrands of Liberty*, 98.

³⁷⁵ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 102-104; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 105-106.

troops, Higginson also worried about the Confederate advantage of rapid communication and transportation with forces stationed in Savannah, Georgia. These factors left Higginson, Montgomery, and their men in a limited position regarding their other objectives. As Higginson noted, "to hold it [Jacksonville], and also make forays up the river, certainly required a larger number."³⁷⁶ This reality dashed many of the hopes of sending raids en masse into the interior of Florida to boost their numbers by recruiting enslaved men sent there by their enslavers.³⁷⁷

Along with the tenuous situation in which these forces found themselves, Higginson also noted that their occupation of Jacksonville tested his soldiers' discipline in occupying an enemy city for an extent period of time. As Higginson noted, "on the former expedition the men were upon trial as to their courage, now they were to endure another test, as to their demeanor as victors."³⁷⁸ For the Florida men in particular, this meant coming face to face with their former enslavers and treating them with a degree of respect their enslavers never afforded them. In one instance, a soldier from Florida known as "long-legged Jake" attempted to confront his former enslaver while his detachment conducted a raid near his former plantation, Mulberry Grove. Jake had lived there with his wife, Etta, whom his enslaver, A. M. Reed, had sold to Georgia. Jake had hoped to confront Reed, but after finding only Reed's daughter, he retired, leaving her frightened but unharmed.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁶ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 107.

³⁷⁷ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 107-108; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 121-122.

³⁷⁸ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 108.

³⁷⁹ Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 129; Daniel L. Schafer, "Freedom Was as Close as the River: African Americans and the Civil War in Northeast Florida," in *The African American Heritage of Florida*, ed. David R. Colburn and Jane L. Landers (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 152-181.

For other soldiers, it meant frequent reminders of their past lives, as it did for others during the St. Marys raid. For example, as Higginson commandeered a house to set up his quarters, he learned that one of his men, Thomas Hodges, had built it as an enslaved laborer. In a case previously mentioned, some Florida-born members of the regiment pointed out to him the spot where the city's citizens had lynched their brother. During a raid up further up the St. Johns, Montgomery and his men arrested a Confederate colonel and as they took him away they encountered his wife who poured out "the vials of her indignation on the heads of us hard-hearted Yankees for separating husband and wife." When his men reminded the woman of the separation of their wives and families, she remarked "your wives? What are your wives but nasty old black things?"³⁸⁰ These examples demonstrate why Higginson had concerns about how his soldiers would respond as occupiers of the enemy city where some had grown up. However, as shown in the stories of long-legged Jake, Hodges, and the general lack of reported violence, these soldiers also demonstrated the ability and discipline they had in facing this unique trial.³⁸¹

Underlying the complex dynamics of occupying Jacksonville lay the constant threat of attack or bombardment from Confederate forces camped on the city's outskirts. Aware of this threat and expecting to occupy Jacksonville for a while, Higginson ordered his men to cut down trees to improve sight lines, construct barricades to block approaches to the city, and build two forts, named Fort Higginson and Fort Montgomery. Over the next few weeks, Confederate forces under General Finnegan launched a few bombardments on the city and engaged in light skirmishes with US pickets. As a major

³⁸⁰ William Lee Apthorp, "Montgomery's Raids in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina."

³⁸¹ Ashe, *Firebrands of Liberty*, 120; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 109.

assault became less likely, Higginson's concerns shifted to a Confederate bombardment or an attempt to burn Jacksonville. He also worried about his men, for with their limited numbers "our men were giving out from overwork, and the recruiting excursions, for which we had mainly come, were hardly possible."³⁸² Fortunately, on the night of March 20, the 6th Connecticut Infantry arrived as reinforcements, and two days later, a part of the 8th Maine Infantry.³⁸³

While these reinforcements brought relief to the 1st and 2nd regiments, they also posed another test for the two regiments. White soldiers made up both the 6th Connecticut and the 8th Maine. Their arrival meant that Black and white U.S. infantry soldiers would have to interact and work alongside each other while occupying an enemy town with adversarial forces on its perimeter. Well aware of the new precedents his soldiers set through their service, Higginson expressed his concern, "I shudder...to think of the train of consequences, bearing on the whole course of subsequent national events, which one such mishap might then have produced."³⁸⁴ Despite being on the geographic periphery and the expedition's relatively small number of soldiers, Higginson had reason to worry, as the North's press gave significant attention to Black soldiers' occupation of Jacksonville. During the two Black regiments' brief occupation of Jacksonville, the *New York Times* published seven articles. As they had in the past, his soldiers again proved their ability to perform their duty successfully. Even when Higginson sent a Black and a white regiment on an expedition to the enemy's camp, in one of the earliest instances of Black and white regiments engaging the enemy side by

³⁸² Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 116.

³⁸³ Higginson, *Army Life*, 116, 118.

³⁸⁴ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 118.

side, both regiments demonstrated that the soldiers could work together even under enemy artillery fire. Discussing the expedition, Higginson noted that “for the first time I saw the two colors fairly alternate on the military chessboard; it had been the object of much labor and many dreams.”³⁸⁵

Although the circumstances of the occupation limited the two regiments’ ability to conduct raids into the interior of Florida, individual Black soldiers used the situation to demonstrate their resourcefulness. One of the few excursions into the interior came through the proactive actions of Thomas Long. Likely drawing on knowledge of the area developed through his prior work as a teamster, Long convinced his company’s sergeant, a fellow Floridian named Henry McIntyre, to help him secure approval for a solo expedition. Long knew of a railroad bridge about a dozen miles behind enemy lines. He planned to infiltrate enemy lines, reach the bridge, and set it on fire. After securing approval, Long disguised himself in civilian clothes and set out on March 25th. In embarking on this solo expedition, Long put himself at great risk. If captured, Confederates could have executed him or sold him back into slavery. Incredibly, and to the surprise of his commanders, Long later returned to camp unharmed, having gathered information about the enemy. Long had scouted the enemy camp, Camp Finnegan, and had found the railroad bridge, but “finding it closely watched by pickets he did not attempt to burn it.”³⁸⁶ Though unsuccessful in destroying the railroad bridge, this solo expedition demonstrated the proactive actions and willingness of Black soldiers to choose to put themselves in harm’s way in pursuit of military objectives. Additionally,

³⁸⁵ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 118, 122; Martin, “The New York Times Views Civil War Jacksonville,” 421.

³⁸⁶ Rogers, “Letters from Seth Rogers”, March 28, 1863; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 154-158.

it illustrates the potential capability of soldiers like Long to use their knowledge of the local terrain and geography.³⁸⁷

Other soldiers sought to leverage U.S. military resources and presence for personal objectives. John Quincy enlisted in the 1st South Carolina in November 1862 at age 44. Born in South Carolina, Quincy's enslaver sold him to William D. Moseley in Florida, where he spent the rest of his life. While enslaved by Moseley on a plantation near Palatka on the banks of the St. Johns River, Quincy married a fellow enslaved woman named Barbara Freeman. Freeman had similarly been born outside Florida, in North Carolina, and forcibly relocated to Florida as part of a sale to Moseley. John and Barbara lived as husband and wife and had two children, Lizzie and John. After a raid upriver from Palatka in which the regiment successfully loaded the ship with confiscated material, Quincy persuaded Colonel Montgomery to make a short detour to Palatka so he could free his family. After a lead scout found the streets of Palatka deserted, Quincy and a group of seven or eight soldiers began to disembark. As they did so, a voice rang out, followed by a volley of gunfire. Some of the soldiers immediately got back onto the ship. Quincy, however, lay wounded on the wharf after a bullet struck his ankle. Under fire, his comrades grabbed Quincy and dragged him back aboard the ship. As the gunboat retreated down the river, Montgomery ordered the crew to fire cannons at the town until Confederate rifle fire ceased. Three days later, Dr. Rogers had to amputate Quincy's wounded leg. Eventually, Quincy passed away from his injuries while receiving treatment at the general hospital in Beaufort. Quincy's and Long's undertakings

³⁸⁷ Thomas Long, Sergeant, Company G, 33rd USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; CMSR for Thomas Long, Sergeant, 33rd Regiment; Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, ed. Christopher Looby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)132, 209.

demonstrated the proactive character of these men as they sought to influence the war through the local knowledge they possessed or by using their positions as soldiers to achieve personal objectives within the larger war.³⁸⁸

Despite the expedition's successes and the influx of reinforcements, on March 27, the ships *Boston* and *Convoy* came up the river empty, carrying orders from General Hunter to evacuate Jacksonville. The orders came as a shock and a disappointment to the two regiments, which had expected to occupy Jacksonville for much longer, certainly longer than fifteen days. In expressing his own disappointment, Rogers' sentiments perhaps mirrored those felt by other soldiers and officers, "this is one of the sad days of my life. The evacuation of Jacksonville is the burial of so many hopes I had cherished for the oppressed...I greatly fear we are to be put back: out of action service at a moment when there is most need for us to work."³⁸⁹ The officers received no initial explanation for Hunter's sudden change of heart. Many began to generate theories to explain this rapid turn of events. Taking a cynical view, Rogers suspected that "Gen. Hunter has been influenced by pro-slavery counsels."³⁹⁰ Higginson presumed that "it may have been simply the scarcity of troops in the Department, and the renewed conviction at head-quarters that we were too few to hold the post alone."³⁹¹

³⁸⁸ Ashe, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 160-161; James Montgomery to Mrs. George L. Stearns, 25 April 1863, Stearns Papers; Seth Rogers, "Letters from Seth Rogers," March 28, 31, 1863; *New York Daily Tribune*, 8 April 1863; *Savannah Daily Morning News*, 6, 10, 15, April 1863; CMSR for John Quincy, Private, 33rd Regiment; William Lee Apthorp, "Montgomery's Raids in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina,"; Hawks, *A Woman Doctor's Civil War*, 45.

³⁸⁹ Rogers, *Letters from Seth Rogers*, March 29, 1863.

³⁹⁰ Rogers, *Letters from Seth Rogers*, April 1, 1863.

³⁹¹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 129

As disappointed as the Florida men in both regiments felt about leaving Northeast Florida again, they did so having accomplished many of the expedition's objectives. They had taken and held Jacksonville and proved capable of occupying a Confederate town with a relatively hostile population and the threat of nearby enemy forces. For the men of the 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiment, this expedition and the numerous raids they conducted constituted their first experience in active combat. Not only did they conduct themselves admirably, they did so without having undergone much drill training and only recently receiving their weapons. In the aftermath of the expedition, Lincoln wrote to Hunter praising the colored regiments, "I am glad to see the account of your colored force at Jacksonville. It is important to the enemy that such a force shall not take shape and grow and thrive in the South, and in precisely the same proportion it is important to us that it shall."³⁹² These raids had successfully grown their revolt against slavery by freeing enslaved individuals and recruiting a number of them into their ranks, despite a significant portion of these individuals having either self-emancipated already or forcibly moved into the interior. The regiments did enlist a handful of new recruits, albeit far fewer than they had hoped. The 2nd South Carolina, in particular, grew as natives of Jacksonville and nearby regions, men like Smart Primas, Simon Primas, and Adam Robinson, William Hancock, Francis Braddock, and a handful of others, took advantage of the presence of the U.S. Army to enlist. For the two Primas' and Robinson, their enlistment likely came as the direct result of a raid by the 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiment on the town of Mandarin. The two expeditions also continued to build on the increasing use of combined amphibious operations

³⁹² OR, ser. 1, vol. 14, 435; Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 65.

between the U.S. Army and Navy, a characteristic unique to this area of the war and one that relied on the local knowledge of Black soldiers for its success. The triumphs of both expeditions present the U.S. military high command with a viable strategy for moving forward, particularly along the South Atlantic coast, that would best utilize the knowledge and advantages that Black soldiers offered.³⁹³

Over the next few months, that strategy continued to bear fruit as the 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiment participated in two more raids: a raid up the Combahee River in South Carolina and the Altamaha River in Georgia. As with the St. Marys and St. Johns expeditions, the military commanders drew on the knowledge of their Black soldiers, who had lived in the areas, to great success. The Combahee River, in particular, saw the 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiment work with the famed Underground Railroad conductor and abolitionist leader Harriet Tubman to free around 750 enslaved people.³⁹⁴

These accomplishments not only garnered praise from Lincoln and the Northern public, but it also led to a backlash from the Confederacy. In the midst of these successful raids by the 1st and 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiments, Davis and the Confederate Congress reiterated an order issued on Christmas Eve 1862 that delegitimized Black soldiers as enslaved individuals in armed rebellion and ordered their treatment as fugitives if captured. The order, issued May 1, 1863, claimed that the Emancipation Proclamation, recruitment of Black men, and similar acts by the United

³⁹³ CMSR for Smart Primas, Private, 33rd USCI.; CMSR for Simon Primas, Private, 33rd USCI.; CMSR for Adam Robinson, Private, 33rd USCI.; CMSR for William Hancock, Sergeant, 34th Regiment; CMSR for Francis Braddock, Private, 34th USCI.; William Lee Apthorp, "Montgomery's Raids in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina."

³⁹⁴ For a detailed description of the Combahee Raid see Field-Black, *Combee*. For a brief description of the Altamaha Raid and the burning of Darien, Georgia, see *Combee* pages 405-408.

States amounted to an incitement of a “servile war” that violated the rules of civilized war.³⁹⁵ In addition to treating formerly enslaved soldiers as felons, the resolution extended that treatment to free Blacks and the white officers of the Black regiments. From the Confederates' perspective, these operations involving Black regiments along the South Atlantic coast changed the nature of the war. Therefore, while many in the regiment may have seen the return to Beaufort as a step backward in their military service, their efforts had a profound impact on the broader conflict. They had proven their capabilities and potential; the question remained whether and how the U.S. military would utilize these men going forward.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁵ *OR*, ser. 1, vol. 28, pt. 2: 236-237.

³⁹⁶ *OR*, ser. 2, vol. 5, 795-797; Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*.

Chapter 4: A Battle on Many Fronts

On January 29, 1865, after nearly two and a half years, Robert Defoe once again reunited with his regiment, the 33rd USCI. Defoe, originally from Nassau County, Florida, had enlisted in the 33rd USCI (then called the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment) on December 2, 1862. Like the other members of his regiment, Defoe had trained at Camp Saxton near Beaufort, South Carolina. He had participated in expeditions up the St. Marys and St. Johns Rivers, where the regiment gained much of its notoriety. After returning to Beaufort at the end of spring 1863, the regiment spent much of the next few months on picket duty as the U.S. military sought to maintain control over the Sea Islands in and around Port Royal. At the beginning of September, Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson sent Defoe, Robert Sutton, and Thomas Long on a detachment with John Emory Bryant of the 8th Maine up the Combahee River to intercept telegraph dispatches. During the small raid, a passenger on a passing train notified Confederate cavalry. In the subsequent pursuit, the Confederates captured Defoe and a few other U.S. soldiers. For the next two and a half years, Defoe survived in the jail at Walterborough, South Carolina, since the Confederacy considered him a felon, not a legitimate soldier. When William Tecumseh Sherman's Army reached Pocotaligo, South Carolina, after taking Savannah, Georgia, Defoe made his escape and rejoined his company. Unfortunately, soon after his return, Defoe contracted smallpox and died at the beginning of May 1865.³⁹⁷ At the time of his burial at Savannah, Defoe had yet to receive any money for his nearly three years of service.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁷ CMSR for Robert Defoe provides conflicting dates as to the date of his death and burial; listing both May 4th and May 5th as dates for his death and burial.

³⁹⁸ CMSR for Robert Defoe, Private, 33rd USCI; Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp: An African American Women's Civil War Memoir*, (Published by the Author, 1902), 28; Thomas Wentworth

Defoe's account illustrates the effects that racism could have on these Black soldiers' military experience. While racism could appear overtly at times, as seen in the Confederacy's policy toward Black soldiers or the U.S. policy of paying Black soldiers less, racial discrimination and bias manifested themselves in other forms. As the war progressed and Black men from Northeast Florida and other parts of the South Atlantic continued to enlist, they sought to advance their fight for freedom beyond the elimination of slavery to include equal treatment. Their fight for equality occurred on multiple fronts and not only against the Confederacy.³⁹⁹ In a complex wartime environment confronting racism from seemingly all sides, these men continued to find ways to assert their agency and, through their actions, to reshape U.S. military policy and the war. However, despite their achievements, political myopia among government and military officials failed to make the best use of the Black regiments at their disposal.

One of the most glaring and dangerous examples of racial discrimination Black soldiers faced during the war came in their delegitimization and mistreatment at the

Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1870), 231-232; Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, ed. Christopher Looby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 310; CMSR for Robert Defoe, Private, 33rd USCI.

³⁹⁹ For further discussion on racism broadly speaking across the United States see George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016); John Craig Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion in the Early American West* (Charlotte, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007); Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); James Oakes, *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990); Andrew Delbanco, *The Abolitionist Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

hands of the Confederate government and military.⁴⁰⁰ When the Confederates captured Defoe, they did not send him to a prisoner-of-war camp but instead to a civilian jail in Walterboro, South Carolina. The reason for Defoe's detention outside a military prison stemmed from the ongoing debate between the United States and Confederate armies and governments over the legitimacy and treatment of Black soldiers, particularly those previously enslaved. From the outset of the United States Army enlisting Black soldiers, the Confederacy saw these actions as contrary to the rules of civilized warfare and accused the U.S. Army of fomenting a servile insurrection. In a letter from Confederate Brigadier General Hugh W. Mercer to General P. G. T. Beauregard, Hugh expressed a sentiment shared by many white southerners, "they are slaves taken with arms in hand against their masters and wearing the abolition uniform."⁴⁰¹

Men like Defoe personified the threat that secessionists had feared since Republicans in the North first started winning elections on a platform of restricting the spread of slavery: "race war and the destruction of civilization itself."⁴⁰² In the Confederates' minds, the men of the 1st and 2nd South Carolina regiments did not count as legitimate soldiers. They saw these Black soldiers as taking part in a violent slave revolt. According to Confederate Secretary of War, James A. Seddon, "slaves in flagrant rebellion are subject to death by the laws of every slave-holding state...yet for example and to suppress any spirit of insubordination it is deemed essential that slaves in armed insurrection should meet condign punishment."⁴⁰³ As a result of these

⁴⁰⁰ For examples of proclamations and acts by the Confederate government, see *OR*, ser. 2, vol. 5, 795-797; *OR*, ser. 1, vol. 28, pt. 2: 235-236.

⁴⁰¹ *OR*, ser. 2, vol. 4: 945-946, quoted in Loren Foote, *Rites of Retaliation: Civilization, Soldiers, and Campaigns in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 45.

⁴⁰² Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 56.

⁴⁰³ *OR*, ser. 2, vol. 4: 954, quoted in Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 45.

viewpoints, the Confederacy began a tit-for-tat response that they hoped would dissuade the United States from continuing to enlist and utilize colored troops.⁴⁰⁴

Similar attempts to offer freedom to enslaved individuals in exchange for military service had occurred before in U.S. history. During both the American Revolution and the War of 1812, the British attempted to offer emancipation to enslaved individuals who fled to British lines and enlisted. The Dunmore Proclamation of 1775 and the Cochrane Proclamation of 1814 both incited the anxiety of Americans in the North and South of a mass enslaved insurrection, which viewed such actions as beyond the pale of legitimate warfare. The Confederates maintained the belief that nations could not use enslaved revolts as a legitimate instrument of war. In a resolution passed on May 1, 1863, the Confederate Congress declared Black soldiers, even those born free in Northern states, participants in servile insurrection and subject to the authority of the state where captured. For this reason, Defoe and other Black soldiers, like the seventy-three soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts captured in the famed assault on Fort Wagner, found themselves in jail, treated as felons rather than prisoners of war. As felons, Defoe and other Black soldiers fell under the jurisdiction of state and local laws, many of which included punishments of re-enslavement or execution.⁴⁰⁵ Demonstrating the

⁴⁰⁴ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 56, 84. For further discussion about Confederate policy towards Black soldiers and enslaved Blacks see Kevin M. Levin, *Searching for Black Confederates* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Bruce C. Levine, *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves during the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Gregory J. W. Urwin, ed. *Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004); Robert F. Durden, *The Gray and the Black: The Confederate Debate on Emancipation* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2000); George S. Burkhardt, *Confederate Rage, Yankee Wrath: No Quarter in the Civil War* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007).

⁴⁰⁵ Currently, there are no recorded instances of state or local courts executing Black soldiers held as felons. A South Carolina trial involved four Black prisoners of the 54th Massachusetts taken during the assault of Fort Wagner was held in September of 1863. As these four men were free Black from the North and not formerly enslaved individuals, the court decided it had no jurisdiction. While the threat of

seriousness with which the Confederacy viewed the enlistment of Black soldiers, the resolution went even further, announcing that captured U.S. officers commanding Black regiments would face a Confederate military court that would try them for inciting servile insurrection. These actions raised the stakes of military service for Black soldiers and their white officers. Although state authorities rarely followed through on this policy by executing Black soldiers, the threat of such possibilities lived large in the minds of Black soldiers, particularly former enslaved ones, as multiple prior slave insurrections had ended in the execution of Black individuals by local and state authorities.⁴⁰⁶ The existence of Black soldiers put both sides of the conflict on the brink of a war that went beyond their civilized expectations. As Foote argues, the Confederacy's adoption of racially discriminatory policies in retaliation for the recruitment and use of Black soldiers led both sides to face the question "whether they could fight a Civil War and maintain their essential identity as a civilized people."⁴⁰⁷

The answer to that question, in part, came in February 1864, when Confederate troops massacred wounded Black soldiers during Florida's largest battle, the Battle of Olustee. During the fourth and final occupation of Jacksonville in February 1864, U.S. Army forces under Brigadier General Truman Seymour attempted to advance toward Lake City in North Central Florida. Confronting Confederate forces under the command of Joseph Finegan, leader of Confederate forces in that area throughout much of the

execution loomed large over Black soldiers, the Confederacy never formally carried out its policy in fear and under threat of retaliation by the United States. Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 98-99.

⁴⁰⁶ Some notable enslaved insurrections that resulted in the execution of Blacks include: Stono Rebellion, Gabriel's Rebellion, Denmark Vesey Rebellion, and Nat Turner's Rebellion. Kerry Walters, *American Slave Revolts and Conspiracies: A Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2015).

⁴⁰⁷ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 5, 58, 71, 92, 91-92; *OR*, ser. 2, vol. 6:45; *OR*, ser. 1, vol. 28, pt. 2:236-237. the

war, the two sides clashed near the town of Olustee, Florida. While the battle ended in a Confederate victory that had questionable significance, the real significance of the engagement lay in its aftermath. As U.S. forces hastily retreated, Confederate forces did not pursue but rather roamed the battlefield, and some began massacring wounded Black soldiers. As one Confederate soldier remarked, "The negroes were badly cut up and killed. Our men killed some of them after they had fell in our hands wounded."⁴⁰⁸ A white U.S. soldier injured in battle and hiding in a bush later remarked that he saw Confederate troops bayonet Black men without mercy. As noted by Foote, "it is impossible to reconstruct accurately the exact number of murders on the Olustee battlefield, and estimates range from 25 to 75 of the 158 Black soldiers listed as missing in Union casualty reports."⁴⁰⁹ The specter of Black men in uniforms engendered animosity, leading some Confederate troops to cast off the shackles of civilized warfare and engage in massacre. Although the Confederate military and government had not explicitly called for such barbaric actions, their characterizations of Black troops as illegitimate soldiers and enslaved men in revolt tacitly permitted them.⁴¹⁰ Olustee was not the only example of this dramatic shift in the nature of the war, as Confederates carried out a larger massacre a few months later at Fort Pillow, Tennessee. In response to both of these massacres, Black troops and their white officers understood that they

⁴⁰⁸ James Jordan to Louisa, February 21, 1864, original in Vol. 2, Letters from Confederate Soldiers, United Daughters of the Confederacy Collection, Georgia State Archives; Capt. Winston Stephens to His Wife, February 21, 1864, Battle of Olustee.org <https://battleofolustee.org/letters/wstephens1.html>, both quoted in Foote, *Rites and Retaliation*, 124.

⁴⁰⁹ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 124-125. The rest of the Black soldiers were taken as prisoners. At this point in the conflict, Confederate policy stipulated a differentiation between free Blacks and formerly enslaved Blacks, with the later being treated as prisoners of war and the former still as felons. Most of the prisoners of the Battle of Olustee would be sent to the infamous Confederate prison at Andersonville, Georgia. Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 131-133.

⁴¹⁰ *OR*, ser. 2, vol. 5, pp. 795-797.

would receive no quarter if they surrendered and vowed to respond in kind to Confederates.⁴¹¹

The Fort Pillow Massacre led to even broader changes in the war. Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, at this point the commander of the entire U.S. Army, retaliated against these massacres by ending all prisoner exchanges with the Confederacy. In a letter to General Benjamin F. Butler, the U.S. agent for prisoner exchange at the time, Grant forcefully requested that “no distinction whatever will be made in the exchange between white and colored prisoners” and that a rejection of this request by the Confederates “will be regarded as a refusal on their part to agree to the further exchange of prisoners.”⁴¹² The idea of exchanging Black soldiers for white soldiers proved too much for the Confederate government, and therefore, all prisoner exchanges between the two sides halted for the duration of the war. The end of this system led to overcrowding in the prison camps on both sides and the creation of untenable and horrific conditions, including most famously at Andersonville, where some of the Black soldiers who fought in the Battle of Olustee and served with the 54th Massachusetts went.⁴¹³

⁴¹¹ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 124-126, 134-136; For further details about the Battle of Olustee see Daniel L. Schafer, *Thunder on the River: The Civil War in Northeast Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010); Luis F. Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment: The History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry 1863-1865* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 1995); Robert P. Broadwater, *The Battle of Olustee, 1864: The Final Union Attempt to Seize Florida* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006); William H. Nulty, *Confederate Florida: The Road to Olustee* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1994). For further discussion about the Fort Pillow Massacre see John Cimprich, *Fort Pillow, a Civil War Massacre, and Public Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Brian Steel Wills, *The River Was Dyed with Blood: Nathan Bedford Forrest and Fort Pillow* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014); David Silkenat, *Raising the White Flag: How Surrender Defined the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

⁴¹² Benjamin Franklin Butler and Jessie Ames Marshall; *Private and Official Correspondence of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler*, vol. 4 (Norwood, MA: Plimpton Press), 83-84.

⁴¹³ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 131-133. For further discussion of the prisoner exchange system and Civil War military prisons see William B. Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University

Defoe's story not only demonstrates the impact of the Confederacy's racial policies but also illustrates that Black soldiers faced racial discrimination from their own side. When Defoe, like all other Black men, enlisted in the Army, he quickly confronted racial discrimination from the United States military and the federal government. Not only did many undergo medical examinations; the military also issued them second-rate clothing, guns, and supplies. On top of this, the War Department announced that Black soldiers would receive only ten dollars a month, with three dollars deducted for clothing. Additionally, Black non-commissioned officers would receive no increase in pay upon promotion. Originally, when General Rufus Saxton received the order from Secretary of War Edwin Stanton granting permission to recruit Black soldiers, the order stipulated that the soldiers would have "the same pay and rations as are allowed by law to volunteers in the service."⁴¹⁴ That plan did not last long, however, as the War Department reversed its stance on March 3, 1863. The general order issued by the War Department required that Black soldiers receive "ten dollars per month...three dollars of which monthly pay may be in clothing."⁴¹⁵ The sudden reversal came after the War Department solicitor, William Whiting, reinterpreted the Militia Act of 1862 to allow the U.S. military to enlist Black Americans as, in essence, military laborers rather than soldiers. This decision also allowed the Lincoln administration to placate many in the North who feared that paying Black and white soldiers the same amount would tacitly acknowledge equality. As Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew stated, "for fear the

Press, 1972); Roger Pickenpaugh, *Captives in Blue: The Civil War Prisons of the Confederacy* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2020); Roger Pickenpaugh, *Captives in Gray: The Civil War Prisons of the Union* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2009).

⁴¹⁴ OR, ser. 1, vol. 14, 377.

⁴¹⁵ OR, ser. 3, vol. 3, 252.

uniform may dignify the enfranchised slave, or make the black man seem like a free citizen, the government means to disgrace and degrade him.”⁴¹⁶ Therefore, despite having already proven themselves largely as soldiers, these Black men's government continued to demean their status and accomplishments.⁴¹⁷

Black soldiers, and even some of their white officers, saw this policy change as clear evidence of racial discrimination. In a letter to the editor of a Black newspaper, a Black soldier expressed his frustration with the treatment, “do we not fill the same ranks? Do we not cover the same place of ground?...The ball does not miss the black man and strike the white, nor the white and strike the black.”⁴¹⁸ Joseph Glatthaar noted the cruel irony of the situation: “Thus, the Federal government had adopted the peculiar policy of calling on the Black race to defend a government that had discriminated against it or permitted its enslavement, with exceedingly limited financial incentives to enable enlistees to provide for their families.”⁴¹⁹ With little means and influence to change the decision, many Black soldiers, including Robert Defoe, decided to refuse pay as a form of protest against this racially discriminatory policy. The genesis for the protest movement came from the South Carolina Colored Regiments and the 54th Massachusetts. The movement eventually spread to other Black regiments throughout the U.S. Army and even to Frederick Douglass, who halted his recruiting efforts, writing, “when I plead for recruits, I want to do it with all my heart...I cannot do that now. The impression settles upon me that colored men have much over-rated the enlightenment,

⁴¹⁶ A. S. Harwell to Kinsley, 7 April 1864, Edward A. Kinsley Papers, Duke University, quoted in Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 172.

⁴¹⁷ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 170; U.S., *Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamations of the United States of America*, vol. 12 (Boston, 1863), 597-600.

⁴¹⁸ *Christian Recorder*, April 2, 1864, 54.

⁴¹⁹ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 65.

justice and generosity of our rulers at Washington.”⁴²⁰ Refusing pay came at great cost, as the lack of pay had a significantly detrimental impact on many of the families of Black soldiers, leaving them with no money or means to sustain themselves during those turbulent times. However, the issue for these men stemmed not so much as a question of money, for the seven dollars a month represented a significant amount for most Black soldiers, particularly formerly enslaved ones. By accepting such pay, “they would be acknowledging a right on the part of the United States to draw a distinction between them and other soldiers...in so doing they would compromise their self respect,” remarked Colonel Edward N. Hallowell.⁴²¹ Or as James Henry Gooding, a Black corporal for the 54th Massachusetts wrote to President Lincoln, “are we Soldiers, or are we labourers.”⁴²² Moreover, the lack of equal pay represented an attack on their freedoms and rights. No longer satisfied with a freedom based on a lack of slavery, the refusal of money illustrated their evolving sense of freedom and its links to equality and citizenship. As Black sergeant William J. Brown wrote to the Secretary of War Edwin Staton, “Hon. Secretary of war I wish to ask you not only for my own Satisfaction but at the Request of my Reg. is Seven Dollars per month all we Soliders to get or may we Expect in the final settlement to get our full Rights as was promiced us at the first.”⁴²³ Note the use of the word “rights” when discussing the final settlement of pay. Clearly, that money symbolized a freedom rooted in equality that these men now expected.⁴²⁴

⁴²⁰ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Boston, MA: De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892), 419.

⁴²¹ Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867. Series II: The Black Military Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 378; Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 170-171.

⁴²² Berlin, Reidy, and Rowland, *Freedom*, 385.

⁴²³ Berlin, Reidy, and Rowland, *Freedom*, 387.

⁴²⁴ Berlin, Reidy, and Rowland, *Freedom*, 364-366; Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 171; Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 28; CMSR for Robert Defoe, Private, 33rd USCI; Brian Taylor,

For Defoe, exercising his agency as a means to resist a racially discriminatory policy, along with many of his Black comrades, meant that when Confederates captured him in September 1863, he had not received any money as part of the collective protest against unequal pay. Nearly two years later, when he escaped in the spring of 1865 and reunited with his company, he should have received equal pay and back pay for his last three years of service. Unfortunately, his untimely death from smallpox in Savannah left Defoe “never having been paid one cent for nearly three years of service.”⁴²⁵ With no recorded wife or children, no one ever received the money owed to him. Defoe’s story offers a specific, personal example of the on-the-ground consequences of this racially discriminatory policy.⁴²⁶

In addition to the decision by Defoe and others to refuse pay until they were granted equal pay, other soldiers employed other forms of resistance. One sergeant of the 21st USCI, William Walker, attempted to protest by refusing to perform his duties as a soldier. In November of 1863, Walker, then a sergeant in the 3rd South Carolina Colored Regiment, led his men in stacking their weapons before their regiment commander’s tent. They told the commander, Colonel Augustus G. Bennett, that they refused to perform any further military duties until they received equal pay. Despite Bennett’s warning that their actions constituted mutiny and that they could face execution, they remained adamant. Bennett formally charged the men with mutiny, and after a court-martial, which found Sergeant Walker guilty, a firing squad executed

Fighting for Citizenship: Black Northerners and the Debate over Military Service in the Civil War (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

⁴²⁵ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 28.

⁴²⁶ Taylor, *Reminiscent of My Life in Camp*, 28; CMSR for Robert Defoe, Private, 33rd USCI.

Walker in February 1864. While fatal, this instance speaks to the significance that many Black soldiers put behind this issue.⁴²⁷

In their efforts at resistance, Black soldiers found some willing allies in their White officers. Many USCI officers used whatever political influence they had to bring about change. Colonel Montgomery wrote a letter to his Senator, Henry Wilson, praising his Black troops and advocating for equal pay. On another occasion, the entire officer corps of the 21st USCI sent a petition to the Adjutant General to plead for equal pay.⁴²⁸ While these efforts did not prompt rapid policy changes, their sustained and determined resistance ultimately led Congress to authorize equal pay in June 1864. The decision to discriminate against the formerly enslaved sparked another wave of backlash from Black soldiers, USCI officers, and abolitionists. Acting slowly, Congress did not approve equal pay for all troops until March 1865, a month before the Army of Northern Virginia's surrender. Despite the federal government's delays in changing these policies, the achievement of reversing this policy lends tremendous credit to the influence of Black soldiers' actions. Even though they had not yet received full political and legal recognition as soldiers, they managed to effect a significant change in military and political policy, just as they had done with emancipation and the recruitment of Black soldiers.⁴²⁹

The refusal to accept pay in protest of the U.S. government's unequal pay policy did not constitute the only instance in Defoe's account in which he asserted his agency through resistance. After his capture alongside the White regiment chaplain, Reverend

⁴²⁷ Berlin, Reidy, and Rowland, *Freedom*, 365-366.

⁴²⁸ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 171-174.

⁴²⁹ OR, ser. 3, vol. 5, 657-659; Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 174.

T. H. Fowler, Defoe used the mask of docility to stay alive.⁴³⁰ The chaplain noted the “sudden transformation” in Defoe’s behavior. Explaining the experience to Higginson, the chaplain remarked that Defoe adopted a “congenial” demeanor whereby “all the force seemed to go out of him, and he surrendered himself like a tortoise to be kicked and trodden upon at this will.” Defoe, whom Higginson referred to as a “faithful soldier” and “distinguished himself on this expedition...for daring and endurance,” managed to transform himself from a trained soldier and “became a slave again, asked no questions, and if any were asked, made meek conciliatory answers.” While it might seem that Defoe had changed his conduct purely out of fear or weakness, the chaplain explained that “he simply acted according to the traditions of his race.”⁴³¹ By adapting his behavior to meet his captors’ expectations, Defoe likely assuaged their anxiety at the sight of a Black soldier. In much the same way that enslaved men and women on plantations engage in performative behavior to influence or placate their enslavers, Defoe’s ability to maintain his composure in a fraught situation kept him alive long enough to later escape. In both instances, Defoe asserted his agency through various forms of resistance to influence the decisions of his enemies and the government he served.⁴³²

⁴³⁰ Raymond Hedin, “The American Slave Narrative: The Justification of the Picaro,” *American Literature* 53, no. 4 (1982): 644; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “The Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Old South,” *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1249.

⁴³¹ Higginson, *Army Life*, 231-232; CMSR for Robert Defoe, Private, 33rd USCI; Thomas Wentworth Higginson to E. W. Smith, October, 18, 1863, “Department of South Letters Received,” October 18, 1863, RG 393, Box 3, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

⁴³² Keith P. Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom: The Camp Life of Black Soldiers During the Civil War* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002), 143-144; Bob Luke and John David Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom: How the Union Army Recruited, Trained, and Deployed the U.S. Colored Troops* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 95; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 11, 53.

Regarding the inherent racism within the U.S. government and military, another instance involving the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment and the pay of Black soldiers demonstrates the varied forms of racism Black soldiers faced within the United States Army. On September 12, 1863, a court-martial convened at Beaufort, South Carolina, by order of General Saxton to hear the case against Captain George Dolly of Company H of the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment. Dolly faced two charges: embezzling funds from his soldiers, refusing to give them their pay, and paying a “mulatto” woman to cohabit with him. During the spring of 1863, Dolly received pay for multiple soldiers who were absent at the hospital due to illness. In each case, Dolly gave the soldiers a small amount of their pay and allegedly embezzled the rest. When some of the soldiers asked Dolly for the rest of their pay, he refused. One of the soldiers, in testimony before the court, claimed that Dolly told him that he had not drawn money on his behalf. During the trial, each of the soldiers had the opportunity to appear before the court and give testimony. Most affirmed that Dolly had given them only part of their pay and that they had not asked Dolly to keep their money. One, Private Jack Latson, had received only \$4 from Dolly but asked him to keep the rest, remarking, “the boys steal money so much that I get the captain to keep mine for me.”⁴³³ A Lieutenant Merriam, a defense witness, noted that Dolly did in fact keep some of the soldiers’ money as “many of them asked him to keep it for them,” but that Dolly did not require the men to do so.⁴³⁴ Merriam further testified that Dolly maintained an accounting book and that other officers received money from the men to keep. Despite the apparent

⁴³³ Court Martial of Captain George Dolly, September 22, 1863, “Department of South Letters Received,” Box 3, RG 393, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Hereafter referred to as Court Martial of Captain George Dolly.

⁴³⁴ Court Martial of Captain George Dolly.

commonality of this practice, the court found Dolly guilty of fraudulently withholding money, not of embezzlement. The court imposed a lenient sentence and ordered Dolly to refund all the money to the various soldiers.⁴³⁵

This case highlights both the relative progression in race relations and the persistence of paternal racism that Black soldiers faced within the U.S. Army. Various facts related to this case demonstrate how the Army treated these men as equal soldiers. These soldiers brought their complaints before their commanding officer, Colonel Higginson, and rather than having those complaints ignored or disregarded, the action led to charges against the White officer and the convening of the court-martial. In that court-martial, these men had the opportunity to stand before the court and testify, something enslaved Black men and women rarely had the opportunity to do, or state laws prohibited them from doing completely. According to the transcription of the proceedings, the Black soldiers received respectful treatment from the judges and attorneys for both sides. Considering that less than a year earlier the federal government and military barred these men from enlisting in the Army due to their race, each of these facts illustrates the progress of the U.S. military and the continued influence of Black soldiers asserting their agency.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁵ Court Martial of Captain George Dolly.

⁴³⁶ Court Martial of Captain George Dolly; Eric Eisner, "Free Black Witnesses in the Antebellum Upper South," *Journal of Southern History* 80, no. 1 (February 2014), 297-298; According to Florida Legislative Council, *An Act Concerning Slaves, Free Negroes and Mulattoes*, approved January 19, 1828 (Florida Territorial Acts), State Library and Archives of Florida, Florida Memory, <https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/345405>, any Black or "mulatto", bond or free could only serve as witnesses against other Blacks or mulattos. While in general state laws prohibited enslaved people from acting as witnesses the work of Eisner and Kimberly M. Welch, *Black Litigants in the Antebellum American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), have added nuance to the discussion by demonstrating that there existed exceptions to the general rule dependent on place and the issue before the court.

However, despite this progress, a closer examination of the testimony of the defendant, Captain Dolly, and his lawyer, Captain John Emory Bryant, reveals an underlying racial bias among the White officers, couched in a paternalistic view of Black men, particularly formerly enslaved ones. At one point during the proceedings, Bryant explained before the court that White officers frequently kept their soldiers' money and commonly refused to give it to them when asked. As Bryant remarked, "the colored men are regarded as children, and the officers in refusing to give them money do that which they regard for the interest of those under their command but with no criminal intent."⁴³⁷ In his final statement of defense, Dolly admitted that he, his fellow officers in the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment, and the regimental banker would withhold money from those men they "supposed would waste it" or spend it "foolishly."⁴³⁸ Dolly went on further to clearly explain his and the other officers' thought process behind this action:

The enlisted men of that Regiment were slaves a few months since. They were not accustomed to have money...their condition instantly changed and they suddenly found themselves entitled to blessing of freedom without being fully prepared to avail themselves of the advantages which their new condition offered. They were like children without parents or guardians. The officers of the 1st S.C. Vols, well knowing the condition of the men under their charge have felt it to be a duty to act in some measure as guardians for their men particularly in money matters.⁴³⁹

Dolly's words demonstrate a paternalistic view of enslaved men that pervaded the officer corps of the 1st South Carolina and much of the USCI. Even for someone as racially progressive for the time as Higginson, who expressed this view in his own writing, referring to them in one instance as a "mysterious race of grown-up children."⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁷ Court Martial of Captain George Dolly.

⁴³⁸ Court Martial of Captain George Dolly.

⁴³⁹ Court Martial of Captain George Dolly.

⁴⁴⁰ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 16-17.

Many of the White officers brought the perspective that slavery had robbed Blacks of their intelligence and culture, a view shaped by the stereotypes of enslaved Blacks prevalent at the time. These characterizations became so pervasive that they persisted after slavery ended, as historians like Stanley M. Elkins argued that slavery had stripped Blacks “of their native African culture, prevented the emergence among them of any meaningful social relation, and turned them into childlike “Sambos” who almost completely internalized the values of their masters.”⁴⁴¹ As such, many Whites and Blacks at the time viewed military service as a means to educate and civilize formerly enslaved Black men. Serving as “their university,” historian Carole Emberton explained how “White reformers viewed military service as a civilizing agent for enslaved men that would teach them... the value of self-restraint, hard work, and family obligations.”⁴⁴² Therefore, drawing on these racialized views, White officers believed it not only acceptable but also their duty to limit the agency and financial freedom of their men.⁴⁴³

Moreover, Dolly’s statement highlights a key insight into the understanding of freedom held by many in the army, government, and public. As Dolly remarked, “they suddenly found themselves entitled to blessing of freedom with being fully prepared to avail themselves of the advantages.”⁴⁴⁴ In other words, Dolly saw freedom not as

⁴⁴¹ Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 135; Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

⁴⁴² Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 13; Carole Emberton, “Only Murder Makes Men: Honor, Manhood, and Violence in the South,” *Journal of Southern History* 77, no. 4 (November 2011), 372.

⁴⁴³ Court Martial of Captain George Dolly; Esther Hawks, *A Woman Doctor’s Civil War: The Diary of Esther Hill Hawks*, ed. Gerald Schwartz (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1984), 37; George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). The intention in describing these varying forces of racism among white U.S. officers is not to disparage or tarnish them or their legacies as a whole. Each of these men were in many ways a product of their unique upbringing and social environments. Given the prevailing views on race and towards Blacks at the time, it stands to reason that even some racially progressive men like Higginson would still harbor some degree of racial bias.

⁴⁴⁴ Court Martial of Captain George Dolly.

inherent to their humanity or as a gift, but as something earned. In Dolly's eyes, these men needed to "prepare" themselves to merit the full realization of their freedom. Others shared Dolly's views, including the famous abolitionist and formerly enslaved Frederick Douglass, who believed that "the true course to the black man's freedom and citizenship was over the battlefield."⁴⁴⁵ Dolly's explanation of this perspective demonstrates the conflicting views on freedom; a conflict Black soldiers would navigate throughout their service and into their lives afterward.

Additional statements in Dolly's testimony reveal further racial attitudes toward Blacks in general. When addressing the charge of paying Clara Pope, a "mulatto" woman, to cohabit with him, Dolly told the court, "that you are aware that the evidence upon which those charges are founded comes from colored persons." He continued by drawing the court's attention to "the acknowledged untruthfulness of these people. Those who are devoting all their energies to improve the race find one of the greatest obstacles...is the almost universal untruthfulness of the colored people."⁴⁴⁶ The fact that Dolly could make such a racist and egregious statement before a military tribunal demonstrates the level of racial prejudice Black men and women faced. Whether through covert racism in paternalistic attitudes or in overt statements, Dolly's statement illustrates the varying degrees of racism that Black soldiers encountered within their own ranks and from their officers.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁵ Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (1892; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1962), 349-350, quoted in Emberton, "Only Murder Makes Men," 369.

⁴⁴⁶ Court Martial of Captain George Dolly.

⁴⁴⁷ The court found Dolly not guilty on the matter referenced. However, his accused interracial relationship is demonstrative of a broader phenomenon of physical and sexual violence towards Black women by white soldiers. For further discussion of this see Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Stephanie McCurry, *The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

In addition to these insights from an analysis of Captain Dolly's court-martial, the incident illustrates the complex relationship between white USCI officers and their Black soldiers. Joseph Glatthaar examines how this relationship developed and the impact the alliance between the two races had on the war. Glatthaar notes that a white officer's racial attitudes and perspectives shaped the training, discipline, and overall military experience of the Black soldiers under their command. This mirrored, albeit to a lesser degree, the relationship between enslaved Blacks and their enslavers. While many white officers in the USCI came from abolitionist backgrounds and held relatively progressive views, others had ulterior motives and held more stereotypical racialized views. These views had real and significant consequences for Black soldiers. An example of this comes from the story of Robert Sutton, the same Florida man who had courageously freed himself and his family, led the St. Marys raid, and gained the admiration of Colonel Higginson and many of the white officers of the regiment.⁴⁴⁸

In the summer of 1863, while the Department of the South high command assigned the men of the 1st and 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiments to picket duty, some soldiers had the opportunity to conduct small-scale raids and scouting missions. One of these scouting detachments would have significant repercussions for two Florida men and highlight the ambivalent relationship between USCI officers and the soldiers. An alleged mutiny during the mission led to the death of John Hill, from Duval County, Florida, and the near execution of one of the regiment's most respected soldiers, Corporal Sutton. On May 9, 1863, Sutton arrived at Fernandina to serve as the guide for an expedition up the St. Marys River. Higginson detached Sutton to serve as a guide

⁴⁴⁸ Glatthaar, *Forged In Battle*, 100-101.

because he had provided the information that served as the basis for a previous expedition and had guided it. The next day, Sutton set out from St. Marys by himself to scout enemy positions and numbers. After four days of scouting and infiltrating enemy lines, Sutton returned to Fernandina but did not find the steamer with the rest of the detachment. Four days later, the steamer *Saxon* returned, and Sutton reported his discoveries to Captains William J. Randolph and Francis J. Meriam. The officers both doubted the truthfulness of his report, something that surprised and offended Sutton, as he had never had his word questioned “even by my masters when a slave.”⁴⁴⁹ Frustrated by this treatment, Sutton felt reluctant to embark on further dangerous scouting missions.⁴⁵⁰

A few days later, Randolph assigned Sutton to another scouting detail, this time with Captain Meriam, Sergeant Thomas Hodges, a fellow Floridian, and Corporal Bill Felder. Unfortunately, as the group tried to go up the St. Marys, they encountered stormy weather at the river’s mouth, forcing them to return to shore. After returning to the *Saxon*, Sutton woke up the next morning sick. Meriam granted Sutton permission to go ashore that day for rest. When Sutton failed to return the next day, Hodges went to visit Sutton. He found Sutton sick in bed, having vomited during the afternoon and suffering from a fever. The next morning, Meriam came to Sutton’s house and ordered him to return on board the *Saxon*. Despite Sutton’s attempts to explain his illness, Meriam continued to order Sutton to return. Once on board the steamer, Sutton met

⁴⁴⁹ Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton, 33rd Regiment, Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), MM-484, Record Group 153, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Hereafter referred to as “Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton.”

⁴⁵⁰ Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton.”

with Randolph, who asked if Sutton “was ready to go.”⁴⁵¹ Sutton once again tried to explain his illness, but like Meriam, Randolph would not listen and pressured Sutton into responding to his request. Sutton said, “I do not want to tell you I will not go,” but Randolph and Meriam kept demanding a response until Sutton had to explicitly say “no.” Sutton later remarked, “I attempted to tell them I was sick but they would not listen to me.”⁴⁵²

These encounters between Sutton, Meriam, and Randolph demonstrate the combative manner in which the two officers treated Sutton and would set the stage for the key incident. Later on the 25th of May, the entire detachment and Sutton sat aboard a steamer anchored off the St. Simons Sound on the coast of Georgia. Randolph ordered his men to conduct a reconnaissance of the mainland. The men, unwilling to obey the captain’s orders, remained below decks until Randolph ordered the non-commissioned officers to bring the men up “dead or alive.”⁴⁵³ Eventually, the men relented, came on deck, and began boarding the surf-boat; however, some of the men gave “considerable back talk.”⁴⁵⁴ Once aboard the surf-boat, Randolph ordered one of the men, John Hill, to take an oar. Hill, a 29-year-old machinist from Duval County, Florida, who had enlisted in December 1862, refused, according to Randolph, and said, “I’ll die here first.”⁴⁵⁵ Randolph repeated his order to Hill, and when Hill continued to refuse, Randolph ordered Sutton to make Hill take an oar. Dr. John M. Hawks, a member of the expedition and a surgeon for the regiment, questioned whether “the

⁴⁵¹ Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton.

⁴⁵² Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton.

⁴⁵³ Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton.

⁴⁵⁴ Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton.

⁴⁵⁵ Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton.

Captain can't make him take an oar and does he expect the sergeant can?"⁴⁵⁶ Sutton tried to order Hill to take the oar, though Randolph later claimed Sutton ignored him. Frustrated with Hill's defiance, Randolph ordered another officer to arrest Hill. As the arrest attempt unfolded, Hill allegedly brought his gun to the ready. A scuffle broke out between Hill, Randolph, and some of the officers and soldiers. During the scuffle, Randolph ordered another officer to shoot Hill. A number of shots went off, including one that struck and killed Hill. Along with Hill, the incident resulted in another unnamed soldier dead and another injured. Randolph ordered the officers to disarm the rest of the men and ordered them back onto the *Saxon*, quelling the alleged mutiny.⁴⁵⁷

In the wake of this tragic event, Randolph attempted to have Sutton court-martialed for refusing orders and failing to intervene in the alleged mutiny. The court-martial met in June 1863. Although the court-martial tried only Sutton, an analysis of the testimonies and proceedings of the trial offers a number of insights applicable to the experience of Black soldiers more generally. First, the testimonies recorded in the trial further reveal the complex relationship between Black soldiers and their white officers. One of the primary factors that made this relationship difficult came from the variety of perspectives and biases held by white officers toward their Black soldiers. These varied feelings manifested in how they treated and commanded their troops, for better or worse. In this case, evidence from the trial suggested a degree of disrespect from the white officers. As Private Joseph Bagley, from Duval County, Florida, and a member of Company G with Sutton, testified, the officers treated the men "very well at first, not very

⁴⁵⁶ Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton.

⁴⁵⁷ Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton.

well at the last.”⁴⁵⁸ When asked whether the men feared the officers “would prove treacherous to them,” Bagley affirmed that he and the men “all had that fear.”⁴⁵⁹ Bagley expressed that the fear came from how the officers “acted so indifferent and unconcernedly.”⁴⁶⁰ This treatment by their officers may have explained the soldiers’ reluctance to board the surf-boat and Hill’s pushback when ordered to take an oar. Sutton’s treatment by Randolph and Meriam when returning aboard the *Saxon* similarly demonstrated their indifference, as they completely dismissed Sutton’s attempts to explain his illness. The trial records provide little insight into the extent to which this indifference stemmed from incompetence rather than racial prejudice. The testimonies of Randolph and other white officers do not provide an explicit example of racial prejudice toward their troops. Higginson, in his testimony, called both insane. However, given the socially prevalent negative attitudes toward Blacks at the time, even in the North, race surely played some role in the affair. The petition for clemency, written to President Lincoln and signed by multiple white officers of the regiment, suggested the existence of racial bias on the part of the Court. The petition noted that in a similar case, a white soldier received a lighter punishment. This mistreatment by white officers, likely born of racial prejudice, had significant consequences for their soldiers in this incident. One soldier, Hill, lost his life for his alleged mutinous behavior, and another, Sutton, received a court-martial and a sentence of execution.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁸ Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton.

⁴⁵⁹ Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton.

⁴⁶⁰ Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton.

⁴⁶¹ Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton; Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 109-111; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 259; George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*.

However, while the probable racism of one officer led to one man's death, the other officers saved Sutton's. Higginson, who, by most accounts, treated his men respectfully, served as a key witness in the proceedings. His statement about Sutton starkly contrasts with Sutton's treatment by Randolph and Meriam. In his testimony, Higginson expressed his high praise and respect for Sutton, saying, "I have had better opportunity for knowing him better than any other man of my regiment...there is no man in whom there is greater confidence placed than on him."⁴⁶² Other officers shared Higginson's respect for Sutton, as evidenced by the petition for clemency they signed and sent to President Abraham Lincoln. That petition saved Sutton's life, as Lincoln remitted the sentence on July 21, 1863. After receiving his pardon, Sutton returned to his regiment, and Higginson reinstated him as sergeant of Company G.⁴⁶³

The court-martial proceedings also highlight a significant change in the lives of Black men. Throughout the proceedings, Sutton and other Black men, as in the Dolly case, exercised their political rights to testify and bear witness before the Court. As noted previously, Florida and most states throughout the South prohibited or severely limited the ability of Blacks to serve as witnesses and to speak during a court proceeding, especially against whites. Sutton had the opportunity to submit a statement to the Court detailing his perspective on the events and expressing his views. Court documents even suggest that Sutton had the opportunity to stand before the Court and question white officers. According to the court transcripts, at multiple points during questioning by the accused, the pronoun "I" was used rather than a third-person pronoun such as "he." The image of a formerly enslaved Black man in uniform standing,

⁴⁶² Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton.

⁴⁶³ Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton; Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*.

testifying, and defending himself before an all-white court illustrates the seismic changes that had taken place in Sutton's life and in the lives of other Black men in a matter of years. Through their continued assertion of agency in a complex environment, Black soldiers, like Sutton, found moments of victory in their ever-evolving battle for freedom.⁴⁶⁴

Simultaneous with these incidents of racial discrimination, the men of Northeast Florida, along with most Black soldiers in the Department, saw their participation in the war shift dramatically as a change in the Department's leadership led to their relative sidelining. After proving themselves under fire and occupying enemy territory in the first half of 1863, many, including their white officers, had hoped they would continue to play an active role in the conflict. The emancipatory success of these raids and the resulting boost to recruitment demonstrated the viability of this strategy. What the Confederates viewed as a strategy to foment a mass servile insurrection presented U.S. commanders with the opportunity to strike at the institution of slavery, raid Confederate towns for food and supplies, and draw new recruits to their ranks while simultaneously undercutting the Confederacy's labor force. However, as the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment evacuated Jacksonville, many likely shared Dr. Seth Rogers' anxieties when he wrote, "this is one of the sad days of my life. The evacuation of Jacksonville is the burial of so many hopes I had cherished for the oppressed...I greatly fear we are to be put back out of action service at a moment when there is most need for us to work."⁴⁶⁵ These concerns had merit as General David Hunter and Admiral Samuel Francis DuPont

⁴⁶⁴ Court Martial of Sergeant Robert Sutton; Larry Eugene Rivers, *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000); Taylor, *Fighting for Citizenship*; Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*.

⁴⁶⁵ Seth Rogers, M.D., "War-Time Letters From Seth Rogers, M.D., March 29, 1863.

continued to face pressure from the War Department and the federal government to take Charleston. Although Charleston held debatable strategic importance, its political and symbolic value as the birthplace of the war led some in the War Department, most notably Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Vasa Fox, to make its capture a primary objective. Many theorized that, in preparation for an assault on the city, Hunter had ordered the evacuation of Jacksonville so he could reallocate his forces. Despite this reallocation, the combined Army and Navy assault on April 7, 1863, failed to capture the city. As a result of that failure, the War Department relieved General Hunter and Admiral DuPont of their commands and promoted General Quincy Adams Gillmore and Admiral John A. Dahlgren in their stead.⁴⁶⁶

With the arrival of a new commander, General Gillmore, the Department of the South underwent a significant change as Gillmore's strategic goals replaced Hunter's vision. Despite the relative success of Hunter's vision, as evidenced by the performance of Black soldiers in multiple expeditions in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, the War Department became more myopic in its desire to take Charleston. Gillmore shared this view with the War Department and, as Foote notes, believed that "an abolitionist agenda had dictated military operations in the Department of the South for too long."⁴⁶⁷ Foote further explains that the Ohio native and West Point graduate came from an engineering background and "believed that war was a science and that new technology in heavy guns, rifled artillery, and engineering were the keys to victory."⁴⁶⁸ Gillmore had

⁴⁶⁶ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black*, 129; Looby, *The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 117-118, 268-269; Stephen V. Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments That Changed the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 171; Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 79-80.

⁴⁶⁷ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 78.

⁴⁶⁸ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 85; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 196-197.

used his engineering prowess to much success previously in the war with the siege and surrender of Fort Pulaski. Given this background, it came as no surprise that, upon assuming command of the Department amid mounting pressure to take Charleston, Gillmore made the capture of that city his primary objective, relocating many of the men under his command, and eschewing the allocation of manpower and resources to other secondary objectives.⁴⁶⁹

Like many commanders in the U.S. Army, Gillmore held a complex view of Black soldiers, one that evolved over time. Early in his tenure at the head of the Department of the South, he did not disdain or resent the Black troops in his department; rather, he viewed them with apathy. As one of his staff wrote, “the fact of the matter is our General attends to military matters” and let alone concerns about the role of Black soldiers in the conflict.⁴⁷⁰ As Foote further explains, “unlike Maj. Gen. David Hunter, who placed Black troops and the destruction of slavery at the heart of his strategy in the Department of the South, Gillmore viewed Black troops with indifference. He was willing to use them as a tool to support his firepower.”⁴⁷¹ When the opportunity to use Black soldiers aligned with his plans to capture Charleston, as it did with the 54th Massachusetts’s ill-fated attack on Fort Wagner on Morris Island, Gillmore acquiesced to their involvement.⁴⁷²

After the disastrous assault on Fort Wagner by the 54th Massachusetts, that laid bare once again the violent racism of the Confederacy as they killed multiple surrendering Black soldiers and desecrated the body of the Regiment’s commander, Robert Gould

⁴⁶⁹ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 85-88; “Quincy A. Gillmore,” U.S. National Park Service, accessed February 23, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/people/quincy-a-gillmore.htm>.

⁴⁷⁰ Quoted in Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 87.

⁴⁷¹ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 87.

⁴⁷² Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 87. For more information about the assault on Fort Wagner and the 54th Massachusetts see Egerton, *Thunder at the Gates*.

Shaw, Gillmore leaned more heavily into his belief in technology and engineering. Foregoing further direct assaults, Gillmore opted to lay siege to Wagner and Charleston and ordered his men to dig an intricate trench system. As Black regiments made up a significant portion of the troops in the department, much of the heavy manual labor required for this trench system fell on Black soldiers. The 54th Massachusetts, the 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiment, and the 3rd USCI performed a significant portion of the fatigue duty in the early stages; other regiments, like the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment, assisted later on. As noted by Foote, “they worked in eight-hour shifts to consolidate trenches with sandbags and lumber, mostly at night, under the fire of Confederate artillery from James Island and sharpshooters in Wagner.”⁴⁷³ Nassau County native Benjamin Wright, who enlisted in the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment in December 1862, received an injury during a Confederate artillery barrage while stationed on Morris Island. A fragment from a Confederate shell struck Wright, wounding his right knee. The injury left him unable to perform any duties until his discharge in March 1865.⁴⁷⁴ The 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiment felt the strain of this fatigue duty as the shift from liberating enslaved individuals stalled recruiting efforts and left the regiment a fraction of full strength. As a result, the men at times had to perform double duty, causing Colonel Montgomery to observe that “this kind of service filled our hospital with broken down men.”⁴⁷⁵ Higginson also noted how Black soldiers

⁴⁷³ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 100.

⁴⁷⁴ CMSR for Benjamin Wright, Private, 33rd USCI; Benjamin Wright, Private, Company G, 33rd USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁷⁵ Quoted in Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 101.

“were injured throughout the army by an undue share of fatigue duty, which is not only exhausting, but demoralizing to a soldier.”⁴⁷⁶

Black regiments throughout the U.S. Army faced a disproportionate share of fatigue duty. This duty, also referred to as noncombat duty, consisted of a myriad of tasks that, while important in supporting the army logistically, kept Black soldiers away from engagements against the Confederates and demonstrated the demeaning view of Black soldiers in the eyes of U.S. military officials. Along with digging trenches, the fatigue duty performed by Black soldiers consisted of constructing fortifications, loading and unloading supply wagons and ship, and other instances of manual labor. Additionally, white commanders frequently assigned Black regiments to guard or picket duties, including guarding interior supply and railroad lines. Although Gillmore had explicitly prohibited this practice in the Department of the South through a General Order stating that “Colored troops will not be required any labor which is not shared by the white troops,” he failed to monitor or enforce his order.⁴⁷⁷ Some white officers exploited this lack of enforcement by assigning manual labor they considered beneath white soldiers, including ordering one instance on Folly Island, South Carolina, where a Black regiment received orders to prepare and police a camp for a white Regiment. The white commander of this Black Regiment, James C. Beecher, complained that such duty “simply throws them back where they were before and reduces them to the position

⁴⁷⁶ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 182. For further discussion on the assault on Fort Wagner see Robert Gould Shaw, *Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw*, ed. Russell Duncan (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992); Luis F. Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment: The History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry 1863-1865* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 1995); Russell Duncan, *Where Death and Glory Meet: Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Infantry* (Athens, GA: 1999).

⁴⁷⁷ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 109-110; *OR*, ser. 1, vol. 28, pt. 2, 123-124.

of slaves again.”⁴⁷⁸ Moreover, the constant assignment of fatigue duty produced a circular reasoning wherein Black regiments rarely engaged in combat since their excessive fatigue duty limited their time for drill, and because they lacked proper training, officers deemed them ill-suited for combat, thus consigning them to more fatigue and guard duty.⁴⁷⁹

The carrying out of this excessive fatigue duty would prove harmful to the health of Black soldiers, leading directly to long-term injuries for two Northeast Florida men. James Eubanks, a formerly enslaved hostler from Nassau County serving in the 21st USCI, suffered kidney and bladder injuries while carrying cartridges around his waist during heavy marching in the latter part of 1864. The injury became so severe that Eubanks struggled to urinate at times and had difficulty performing his duties for the remainder of his time in the army.⁴⁸⁰ John Robinson, another Nassau County native who served in the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment, suffered a debilitating hernia on the right side while lifting a barrel of port from the ground to the wagon. Despite his efforts to stay in the service, Robinson’s injury worsened to the point that he could not perform any duties for two months or even wear his full military uniform. The injury also derailed his promising military career, as Robinson received a demotion from sergeant to private.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁸ Berlin, Reidy, and Rowland, *Freedom*, 493.

⁴⁷⁹ Berlin, Reidy, and Rowland, *Freedom*, 485; Bob Luke and John David Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom: How the Union Army Recruited, Trained, and Deployed the U.S. Colored Troops* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 111-113; Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 109-110. Guard, garrison, and picket are often used interchangeably. This duty typically involved guarding a defensive perimeter, supply lines, or policing the camp. When on the defensive perimeter, soldiers could encounter enemy pickets and engage in small-scale skirmishes.

⁴⁸⁰ CMSR for James Eubanks, Private, 33rd USCI; James Eubanks, Private, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁸¹ CMSR for John Robinson, Private, 33rd USCI.

Gillmore's lack of follow-through and general apathy toward Black soldiers led Higginson to conclude that "nothing can be more certain than that Gillmore allowed the colored troops to be most unreasonable used, as to fatigue duty, not from any hostility but from inattention."⁴⁸² That apathy, however, would change as Gillmore's views toward his Black troops shifted dramatically. Demonstrative of this change, Gillmore wrote a letter to General Halleck on December 13, 1863, in which he noted, "the value and general efficiency of that class of soldiers has had a fair trial and a successful issue...upon the field of battle and in the trenches." Gillmore further requested that Black and white troops receive equal pay and that the U.S. government should provide for the families of Black soldiers.⁴⁸³ Furthermore, Gillmore requested permission from the War Department to send another expedition to Jacksonville, in part to help emancipate more enslaved men and to organize more Black regiments.⁴⁸⁴

Gillmore's remarkable transformation, however, came with caveats. His newfound respect for his Black soldiers did not translate into a change in his overall approach to the department. His continued fixation on Charleston meant that many of the Black soldiers in his department spent much of the second half of 1863 and much of 1864 performing garrison and picket duty. While performing these duties, the men continued to face the prospect of injury and illness without the attention and recognition that came from engagements with the enemy or from carrying out raids.⁴⁸⁵ In particular, the men of the recently created 21st USCI faced a military experience far different from

⁴⁸² Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 339.

⁴⁸³ *OR*, ser. 1, vol. 28, pt. 2, 127-128; Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 112.

⁴⁸⁴ *OR*, ser. 1, vol. 28, pt. 2: 127-129, 135; Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 112. What precipitated this change of heart is unclear from the current research. One possibility could have stemmed from his increasing interaction with Black soldiers as commander of the Department of the South and seeing their capabilities as soldiers in combat and noncombat duties.

⁴⁸⁵ Martin, "The New York Times Views Civil War Jacksonville."

what they had expected. Instead of facing the enemy in battle, they faced illness and injury while marching or performing guard duty. George Floyd, born on Talbot Island, Florida, suffered a debilitating injury to his left eye while conducting a night march. Floyd walked into a large branch of a tree, which struck and injured his left eye. Despite receiving treatment, Floyd's eye never fully recovered. Henry Hannahan, born free in Duval County, Florida, received a bullet wound in his left thigh while stationed on an island opposite James Island near Charleston. Additionally, he contracted a severe case of rheumatism during his service from extreme exposure. On Christmas Eve night in 1864, Hannahan and a detachment of men stood guard over Battery Shaw on Morris Island. That night, a storm hit the area, causing Hannahan and his men to stand guard in rain and cold. The failure of another detachment to relieve them left Hannahan ill and struggling with a stiff knee throughout the remainder of his service. Henry Houston contracted a respiratory illness after performing double duty in standing water. While soldiers of both races suffered injuries of this type related to garrison duty, the lack of opportunity to engage the enemy, particularly for Black soldiers, made it easy for people at the time and after the war to overlook or marginalize their service, despite these noncombat duties arguably playing a vital role in the U.S.'s eventual victory.⁴⁸⁶

The illnesses and wounds many of these Black soldiers experienced left them uniquely vulnerable to racial mistreatment and discrimination by U.S. Army medical

⁴⁸⁶ CMSR for George Floyd, Sergeant, 21st USCI; George Floyd, Sergeant, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C; Henry Hannahan, Sergeant Major, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C; Henry Houston, Private, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Irvin D. S. Winsboro, *Give Them Their Due: African Americans and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019), 237-238; William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1913), 234-235; Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), 236.

personnel. Soldiers of all races on both sides faced the constant threat of disease and injury. Throughout the war, disease and illness accounted for the majority of casualties in both armies. Primitive medical knowledge, inadequate sanitation practices, and exposure to new illnesses led to the deaths or lifelong ailments of men who did not serve on the front lines. However, a number of factors exacerbated that threat for Black soldiers in particular. For example, formerly enslaved soldiers often enlisted with underdeveloped immune systems due to isolation and insufficient medical care while enslaved. Particularly those who came from remote plantations, like many of the men from Northeast Florida and the Sea Islands along the South Carolina and Georgia coast, had a higher probability of contracting and dying from illness. In his study of Civil War soldiers, historian Chulhee Lee found that rural troops in general died at higher rates from disease than those from urban settings. The relative isolation inherent in rural settings meant that those men had less opportunity to come into contact with disease and therefore had less opportunity to build up their natural immunity.⁴⁸⁷

For a soldier like James Eulin of the 21st USCI, who grew up enslaved by the Houston family on the remote Talbot Island, he had little contact with people outside of the Houston and neighboring Christopher plantations. Going from that environment to an urban setting, as he did when he and the 21st USCI occupied Charleston, left him acutely exposed to illnesses like smallpox. During the summer of 1865, Eulin contracted smallpox and passed away, leaving behind a dependent mother, a new bride, and a yet-

⁴⁸⁷ Chulhee Lee, "Prior Exposure to Disease and Later Health and Mortality: Evidence from Civil War Medical Records," in *Health and Labor Force Participation over the Life Cycle: Evidence from the Past*, ed. Dora L. Costa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 51–88; Margaret Humphreys, *Intensely Human: The Health of the Black Soldier in the American Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 8–9; Jim Downs, *Sick From Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

to-be-born child. Similar to Eulin, Henry Williams had also grown up enslaved on the Houston Plantation and contracted smallpox during the summer of 1865. His death on August 4, 1865, left his wife, Laura, without a husband, and his young daughter, Hannah, without a father. Some soldiers would fall ill multiple times during their service, as in the case of Benjamin Williams of the 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiment from Duval County, Florida. Williams spent a significant portion of his wartime experience at military hospitals. On three separate occasions, Williams spent time at hospitals in Jacksonville and Beaufort recovering from unnamed illnesses. The constant battle with disease led Williams to lose his promotion as sergeant. As noted by historian Margaret Humphreys, an upbringing in relative isolation combined with the mistreatment common under enslavement meant that as these men enlisted, they did so “with the worst possible combinations of backgrounds.”⁴⁸⁸

Once in the army, these men faced racial discrimination in a variety of forms that contributed to their risk of dying from disease or injury. As previously noted, because the sanctioning of USCI regiments took so long, most regiments struggled to find physicians due to a number of factors including: a significant shortage of qualified physicians, many of whom were already working with white regiments, and a reluctance by some white physicians to work with Black troops. When regiments did manage to find qualified and willing surgeons, as in the case of Dr. Seth Rogers and John Milton

⁴⁸⁸ James Eulin, Corporal, Company F, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C. For more information about Civil War Medicine more broadly see Frank R. Freeman, *Gangrene and Glory: Medical Care During the American Civil War* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998); CMSR for James Eulin, Corporal, 21st USCI; James Eulin, Corporal, Company F, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; CMSR for Henry Williams, Private, 21st USCI; Henry Williams, Private, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; CMSR for Benjamin Williams, Sergeant, 34th USCI.

Hawks, these surgeons had to contend with the bias and ignorance about Black people that pervaded medical knowledge at the time. According to Humphreys, the “medical dogma of the time had taught that the Black body was different in its response to illness and therapies.”⁴⁸⁹ On one occasion, Rogers noted in his journal, “I can only get the reiteration of the fact that negroes are more subject to these diseases than are the whites.”⁴⁹⁰ Within Rogers’ statement lies the implication that Black and white people had disparate experiences with diseases due to some biological deviation linked to their race rather than to environment or family history. This faulty understanding led even the most abolitionist and racially progressive surgeons, like Rogers, to contend with a baseline belief that, by dint of their race, Black people had innate health issues.

The effects of these dogmas led to racial prejudice in how army surgeons treated Black soldiers. When a soldier fell ill or got wounded, they typically first went to the Regimental Hospital, where they saw the regiment’s surgeon. If a soldier failed to recover or did not receive the proper medical attention, they got sent to the General or Post Hospitals. Historians have noted that Black soldiers received significantly better treatment at regimental hospitals than at general hospitals. In multiple general hospitals, Black soldiers had higher mortality rates than white soldiers. The reason for this disparity stems from factors such as segregated facilities and Black soldiers dealing with under-staffed and poorly maintained hospital wings. At regimental hospitals, surgeons served alongside the soldiers they treated, so soldiers and officers could hold them more accountable. Regimental surgeons also typically had a greater commitment

⁴⁸⁹ Humphreys, *Intensely Human*, 67.

⁴⁹⁰ Seth Rogers, “Letters from Seth Rogers.” January 10, 1863.

to the health of their soldiers, and for many USCI surgeons, they had abolitionist or racially progressive feelings.⁴⁹¹

While Black soldiers in general received worse health care, Humphreys has found significant differences in the treatment of Black soldiers across the various regions of the war. In comparing the death rates from disease among Black soldiers along the Atlantic coast and those stationed in Missouri, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, one historian demonstrated the disparity between the two regions. Black soldiers along the Atlantic coast had significantly fewer total deaths and a mortality rate for various diseases that was more than 60 percent lower. For example, of the 1,535 Black soldiers who died from smallpox in the two areas, only 10 percent came from the Atlantic region. While other factors, such as environment, could have had a significant impact on the disparity, evidence suggests that Black soldiers stationed along the Atlantic coast received relatively better medical treatment.⁴⁹²

The experiences of these men performing important but overlooked garrison, fatigue, and picket duty on the islands outside Charleston demonstrate the continued influence of their white officers' and commanders' perspectives on their service. Even as Gillmore's views toward the Black soldiers under his command evolved, those changes did little to alter his myopic focus on Charleston or to embrace a more emancipationist strategy. Gillmore sent another expedition into Florida in February 1864 to occupy Jacksonville for a fourth time, in part to emancipate and bolster the ranks of his USCI regiments. However, Gillmore inexplicably failed to send one of his most experienced

⁴⁹¹ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 193; Humphreys, *Intensely Human*, 77.

⁴⁹² Humphrey, *Intensely Human*, 83.

Black regiments, the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment, which included a strong contingent of Floridians well acquainted with the area the last expedition had used to great success. Gillmore's tenure as head of the Department of the South illustrates that while the war had long ago stopped being a "white man's" war, it remained a war fought on the terms of white men. The reality of this mirrored the freedom these men experienced. As Glatthaar explains, "freedom, they had perceived, was a shield from the dictates of whites, yet in military service they were again subject to the whim of the white race."⁴⁹³ As the meaning and manifestation of freedom evolved for Blacks, it often came into conflict with the objectives of the war and with overt and covert racism on multiple fronts.⁴⁹⁴

On February 18, 1865, after a lengthy siege campaign and as General William T. Sherman's army marched through South Carolina, Confederates abandoned the stronghold of Charleston as they sought to avoid entrapment. Black soldiers from the 21st USCI regiment marched at the head of United States forces as they moved through the remnants of the city. Crowds of Black men, women, and children lined the street to celebrate. As one staff officer of General Gillmore wrote, "the scene at the wharf was perfectly indescribable...the negroes went perfectly wild, shouting, dancing, beside themselves with excitement."⁴⁹⁵ Two months later, in March, another parade passed through the city to celebrate the "Burying of Slavery." Led by the 21st USCI again and followed by Black women and children singing "John Brown's Body" and carrying banners that read "We Know no Masters but Ourselves." For the men of the

⁴⁹³ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 113.

⁴⁹⁴ Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 196-197.

⁴⁹⁵ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 204-227.

21st, these occasions held great meaning as they marched through the very city where the war began, not as enslaved individuals or even refugees, but as free men wearing the uniforms of the United States Army. These scenes surely invoked awe and symbolized the incredible changes their individual and collective actions had effectuated.⁴⁹⁶

However, even in the wake of the all-important victory and the hope of a new beginning for Black Americans, many Black soldiers again faced the detrimental consequences of racism. As noted in the tragic story of Eulin, his death from smallpox occurred during the summer of 1865, months after the Confederate Army surrendered. Another Florida man, Nicholas Benjamin of the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment from Fernandina, passed away from smallpox even later, in December 1865, after serving since January 1863. Although many soldiers on both sides returned home as the Confederate armies surrendered, Black regiments had to continue serving. The reason for this stemmed from the challenge the U.S. government faced in balancing the demobilization of troops to save money with the need to allow veteran units to return home while retaining a large enough occupation force to maintain a viable military presence in the South. The federal government decided to muster out veteran regiments with the longest service and leave the responsibility for occupying the South and implementing Reconstruction policies to more recently created regiments. This solution seemed justifiable and logical since many of these units had served since the beginning of the war. However, that logic ignored the policy's racial repercussions. Since the military and federal government barred Black soldiers from enlisting before

⁴⁹⁶ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 205-207.

the fall of 1862, despite their attempts to do so, Black regiments constituted much of the newly created units subject to continued service. As white soldiers returned home to family and kin, Black soldiers remained in the field at substantial risk of illness, injury, or death. On January 31, 1866, while occupying Charleston, the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment finally received its muster-out order. The 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiment received its order a month later, in February, while stationed in Jacksonville, and the 21st USCI mustered out in April 1866. Their prolonged service occupying Southern cities resulted not from their decisions but from a racially discriminatory government policy.⁴⁹⁷

As many of the Northeast Florida men returned to Fernandina, Jacksonville, and St. Augustine, they found a world and situation far different from what they had known before the war. They returned to their homes and families as veterans of the greatest military conflict in the country's history at that time. Their actions throughout the war, including their emancipation efforts, enlistment, and service, had helped defeat the institution of slavery. Through their actions, these men had transformed government and military policy; they had reshaped the hearts and minds of many, and they had set their own lives and the country on a new trajectory. However, their military experience had also shown them the many ways that racial discrimination and prejudice could limit their newly obtained freedom. They had not only fought for freedom on the battlefield but also in military courts, in their military camps, in opposition to racialized policies, and

⁴⁹⁷ George Floyd, Sergeant, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; James Eulin, Corporal, Company F, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; CMSR for Nicholas Benjamin, Private, 33rd Regiment. See also Andrew F. Lang, *In the Wake of War: Military Occupation, Emancipation, and Civil War America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017) for in-depth discussion of the experience of Colored Regiments occupying the South after the war.

even against some of their White officers. The strains of racism and white supremacy they faced took different forms and degrees, but all imposed limitations on the new understanding of freedom and equality that these men developed. The stories of individuals like Sutton, Defoe, and others demonstrate the varying ways they asserted their agency to confront the challenges before them. Though they had fought in a war and lived in a world largely dictated by White men, they continued to find and use means to resist, influence decision-making, and carve out areas of freedom.

Conclusion

In 1873, Thomas Warren Long approached the Florida State Capitol building in Tallahassee, Florida. His life had undergone dramatic changes. He was born enslaved by John R. Roberts in Jacksonville around 1841 and spent most of his youth and adolescence working as an enslaved laborer and teamster in Jacksonville and Fernandina. The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 gave him the opportunity to escape slavery. After U.S. Navy ships transported him to the U.S. military base in Port Royal, South Carolina, Long became one of the first Black men from Northeast Florida to enlist in the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment. His bravery and devout Christian beliefs earned him the recognition and admiration of his fellow soldiers and commanding officers. During his military service, Long received multiple promotions and eventually rose to the rank of Sergeant. He also served as an army recruiter in Beaufort, South Carolina, during the final months of the war. After his discharge on January 31, 1866, Long, like many Black soldiers from Northeast Florida, returned to Florida to reunite with his wife and three daughters and start a new life as a free man and veteran. He continued his religious devotion and became a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, eventually serving as presiding elder in Jacksonville. In this role, he helped organize churches across the state, including in Madison County, where he lived for two years; Ocala, for 13 years; and Altamonte Springs, for 15 years. During this time, he maintained his faith and became a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Like many A.M.E. ministers, Long parlayed his ministry into a political career. He served as the Madison County Superintendent of Schools from 1868 to 1869. Despite all the changes he experienced, the most significant came with his election to

the Florida State Senate in 1872. From an enslaved laborer to a state senator, Long's story highlights how his exercise of agency in a tumultuous environment led to significant changes in his life and had broader ramifications.⁴⁹⁸

In the winter and spring of 1866, men from Northeast Florida who served in the 1st South Carolina Colored Regiment (33rd USCI), the 2nd South Carolina Colored Regiment (34th USCI), and the 21st USCI received their discharges. The Civil War had ended, and with the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution on December 6, 1865, so too had the institution of slavery in the U.S. These men now decided what to do and where to go next. For most of them, the choice was to return to Northeast Florida, particularly to Fernandina, Jacksonville, and St. Augustine. Like other Black veterans, they left the army hopeful and expecting a life very different from what they had known. They looked forward to reuniting with wives and children whom they could now live with free from the threat of enslavers selling them away. No longer considered property of others, they anticipated earning from their labor. Rumors of federal land grants and Black voting rights sparked hopes of economic and political freedom. The post-war Reconstruction Era promised them the chance to achieve the equality and citizenship they yearned for; however, as many would later realize, the

⁴⁹⁸ Thomas Long, Sergeant, Company G, 33rd USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; CMSR for Thomas Long, Sergeant, 33rd USCI; Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1870); Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, ed. Christopher Looby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 132, 205; Rogers, "Letters from Seth Rogers", March 28, 1863; Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 154-158; Canter Brown Jr., *Florida's Black Public Officials, 1867-1924* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 105-106. Long served as Marion County State Senator in 1873, 1874, 1875, 1877, and 1879.

fight for freedom they had fought during the war would continue for the rest of their lives.⁴⁹⁹

The Reconstruction Era has been one of the most debated periods in American history. During this time, the nation faced the daunting tasks of rebuilding the country, particularly the cities and landscapes of the South devastated by war, reintegrating the former Confederate states into the Union, and incorporating the millions of formerly enslaved people into American society and the American body politic. As historian Michael W. Fitzgerald noted, Reconstruction saw a struggle between “those who attempted the doomed, but mostly right thing, and those who were doing the very wrong thing and prevailed. But only for a time.”⁵⁰⁰ The era saw the successful re-entry of all former Confederate states, the passing of the Reconstruction Amendments that ended slavery, granted citizenship to all natural-born Americans, and recognized the right to vote for Black men. At the same time, this era also saw the rise of the terrorist organization, the Ku Klux Klan, which terrorized, assaulted, and murdered Black people across the South. It also marked the return to power of former enslavers, Confederate government officials, and military officers, along with the creation of Jim Crow laws that racially segregated society and disenfranchised Black Americans in the South. This complex mix of successes and failures has prompted historians to debate whether the era should be considered a success or failure, for whom, or to what extent the U.S. experienced either.

⁴⁹⁹ Brown, *Florida's Black Public Officials*, 5.

⁵⁰⁰ Michael W. Fitzgerald, *Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2007), 212.

For a long time, some historians sought to portray Black Americans in ways that diminished their agency—either as villains or corrupt tools of Republicans and carpetbaggers, or as hapless observers overwhelmed by the rising waves of white supremacy. However, against these demeaning narratives, voices of early Black historians like W. E. B. DuBois challenged these portrayals and demonstrated the significant achievements Black Americans made in the early decades of Reconstruction. Although many overlooked his work when it was published in 1935, historians in the late 1900s and early 2000s revisited and expanded upon his arguments. Historian Eric Foner, in his seminal work *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, countered many of the early narratives about Blacks during this period by arguing that Reconstruction began with initiatives driven by Black Americans themselves—initiatives that compelled the country to enact emancipation and enlist Black men into the military. Far from passive observers or ignorant puppets, Black Americans actively participated in shaping Reconstruction by pushing forward their priorities and goals, seeking to reorganize their lives and free themselves from subjugation to White authority. As Foner asserts, “perhaps the remarkable thing about Reconstruction was not that it failed, but that it was attempted at all and survived as long as it did.”⁵⁰¹ As he and other historians suggest, the economic, political, and social successes of Blacks during the early years of Reconstruction led to the fierce backlash they faced in the later decades of the 19th century, while also laying the groundwork for the long fight for freedom and civil rights for Black Americans in the U.S.⁵⁰²

⁵⁰¹ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

⁵⁰² For a broad view, look at the Reconstruction era, particularly in relation to the successes of Black Americans and the backlash by white Southerners; see W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in*

Compared to the broad trajectory of Reconstruction, the Reconstruction Era in Florida shared some similarities: it experienced periods of significant success in Black political activity, followed by a white Democratic backlash that gradually diminished the political rights of Black Floridians. However, the story of Reconstruction in Florida contains much more nuance. As historian Canter Brown Jr. argues in *Florida's Black Public Officials, 1867-1924*, the decline of Black political power happened at different times across various levels of government and depended on location.⁵⁰³ In this argument, Brown joins the work of Steven Nash, Michael Fitzgerald, and Adam H. Domby who similarly emphasize the significance of subregions and local contingencies in understanding the varied experiences and trajectories of Black political power and white supremacist backlash during Reconstruction.⁵⁰⁴

America, 1860–1880 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935); Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Fitzgerald, *Splendid Failure*; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Adam H. Domby and Simon Lewis, *Freedoms Gained and Lost: Reconstruction and Its Meaning 150 Years Later* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021). Other historians have expanded the research into this era by looking at other factors like education and memory; see Hilary Green, *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (Fordham, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016); Adam H. Domby, *The False Cause: Fraud, Fabrication, and White Supremacy in Confederate Memory* (Charlotte, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2022); Kathleen Ann Clark, *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration and Political Culture in the South, 1863-1913* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Steven E. Nash, *Reconstruction's Ragged Edge: The Politics of Postwar Life in the Southern Mountains* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005). Historians have also critically examined the timeline of the Reconstruction Era.; see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005); Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999);

⁵⁰³ Canter Brown Jr., *Florida's Black Public Officials, 1867-1924* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998).

⁵⁰⁴ Domby and Lewis, *Freedoms Gained and Lost*; Steven E. Nash, *Reconstruction's Ragged Edge: The Politics of Postwar Life in the Southern Mountains* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Shannon Smith, "'They Mustered a Whole Company of Kuklux as Militia': State Violence and Black Freedoms in Kentucky's Readjustment," in *Freedoms Gained and Lost: Reconstruction and Its Meanings 150 Years Later* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021); Michael W. Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in*

Fernandina exemplifies the different paths of Black power in local governments. In May 1865, just a month after the Confederacy's surrender and five years before the 15th Amendment, Fernandina held what many called the first election with universal male suffrage, with 160 Black voters joining nine Whites to vote for a new mayor. In this initial instance of Black suffrage in Florida, and possibly the entire South, Blacks chose from an all-White ticket. Despite not having any Blacks to vote for, many seized this newly recognized political freedom by registering to vote in 1867, including Edward Dixon (21st USCI), Pablo Gray (21st USCI), Richard Natteel (21st USCI), William Natteel (21st USCI), Frank Pappy (21st USCI), William Pappy (21st USCI), John Robinson (1st S.C.), Antonio Pappy (21st USCI), Smart Primas (1st S.C.), and many others. Other Blacks claimed their voting rights in significant numbers, making up 66 percent of Nassau County's registered voters in 1867-1868. Fernandina's first Black municipal officials did not appear until 1869, with Samuel Boyd elected as city clerk and Charles Knabb. Knabb was born in Darien, Georgia, served in the 21st USCI, and later served as a Fernandina city councilman and Nassau County commissioner. Other USCI veterans also held city and county offices, including Edward Francis Langley (21st USCI), who served on the city council from 1870–1871 and 1875–1876, and Henry Hannahan (21st USCI) served as Fernandina Marshal and tax collector from 1870–1871. Clearly, these individuals understood the importance of political participation in asserting and maintaining their freedom. The election of these men to public office

Alabama: From Civil War to Redemption in the Cotton South (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2017). For further reading about Reconstruction Florida see Joe E. Richardson, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida, 1865-1877* (Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University, 1965); William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York: Columbia University, 1913); Jerrell H. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet, Florida in the Era of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1974).

represented an immediate success for Black political freedom and established Fernandina as a center of Black political power, with 42 Black men serving in various local offices from 1869 to 1902.⁵⁰⁵

Black residents of other towns in Northeast Florida, such as Jacksonville, LaVilla, and St. Augustine, also achieved significant political success in the late 1860s and throughout much of the 1870s. Civil War veterans in these towns similar would become elected to positions of political leadership. Frank Pappy (21st USCI) returned to St. Augustine after his discharge and served as the city's tax assessor from 1881 to 1882. Henry Tillman (1st S.C.) became the Clay County voter registrar from 1867 to 1868. Smart Tillman (1st S.C.) served as LaVilla marshal from 1873 to 1843 and as councilman from 1878 to 1879 and again from 1881 to 1884. Joseph Holder (1st S.C.) also served on the LaVilla city council from 1871 to 1872. Like Fernandina, LaVilla became a central hub of Black political activity, boasting 46 Black local officials from 1870 to 1887. James H. Lang (1st S.C.) served as St. Johns County commissioner from 1868 to 1871. Henry McIntyre (1st S.C.) served as Duval County constable from 1868 to 1870. Like Long, Samuel Anderson served as the representative for Duval County in the Florida House of Representatives. The statewide culmination of this political activity resulted in the election of Josiah Thomas Wells, a Civil War veteran, to the United States House of Representatives, where he served three terms through the 1870s.⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰⁵ Brown, *Florida's Black Public Officials*, 43, 95, 103, 174-175; Florida Voter Registration Lists 1867-1868, Nassau and St. Johns County, Nassau County Public Library, Fernandina Beach Branch; George E. Wolff, "Fernandina in the Long Ago," Amelia Island Museum of History Archive; Kevin Turner, "Blacks once controlled Fernandina politics," *Nassau Neighbor*, March 1, 2007; Cantor Brown Jr., "African Americans of Nassau County Reconstruction Through the Century's Turn," presentation at Peck Center, Fernandina Beach, transcript housed at the Amelia Island Museum of History Archive.

⁵⁰⁶ Brown, *Florida's Black Public Officials*, 49-50, 71-142; Peter D. Klingman, *Josiah Wells: Florida's Black Congressman of Reconstruction* (Gainesville, FL: Library Press at University of Florida, 2017).

As in other parts of the South, the notable success and political activism of Black Floridians triggered a backlash from white southern Democrats. At the state level, Blacks lost significant political power in 1874 after Republican Governor Ossian B. Hart, son of Jacksonville founder Isaiah Hart, died. By 1877, Democrats had gained both the governorship and control of the state legislature. However, losing power statewide did not eliminate Black Floridians' political influence and voice locally. To further undermine Black achievements and political power, white Democrats began imposing stricter voter registration requirements and forced towns like Fernandina to adopt a ward system of representation to isolate Black voters. In 1881, the state legislature passed a law dissolving the city charters in Black-majority areas such as Pensacola and Fernandina, placing them under the control of gubernatorial appointees. Fortunately, the Florida State Supreme Court, which still had a Republican majority, struck down the law. Despite these obstacles, Black people continued to act and resist by voting and seeking office as the battle for their freedom endured.⁵⁰⁷

As seen in how their views on freedom evolved during the war, the Reconstruction Era also saw the meaning of freedom expand beyond politics to include other parts of life. A major aspect of their post-war freedom came from economic stability. Having lived under slavery that prevented them from fully benefiting from their labor, these veterans now aimed for financial security and the hope of land ownership. The growth of railroad projects and tourism along Florida's Atlantic coast brought economic opportunities to places like Jacksonville.⁵⁰⁸ In 1883, a Jacksonville resident

⁵⁰⁷ Brown, *Florida's Black Public Officials*, 29, 50-51, 54; Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

⁵⁰⁸ Brown, *Florida's Black Public Officials*, 45;

wrote to the *New York Globe*, a Black weekly newspaper in New York City, describing the circumstances of Black residents in the city. The letter noted how “many of these [Black residents] are property holders, some running up into the thousands in the value of their real estates,” and that in general, “colored men have a fair show in the trades, most of the native mechanics being colored, and of this state of affairs the colored people have not been slow to avail themselves.” The letter also describes the numerous Black schools and a vibrant religious community.⁵⁰⁹ Some veterans found economic stability in this post-war environment. Long and February Francis (who would later change his last name to Shaw) found success through their ministries. Long became a prominent minister of the A.M.E. Church, and February helped establish the Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church in St. Nicholas, a neighborhood near Jacksonville. Both men also became property owners. Another veteran, Elias Lottery (1st S.C.), similarly achieved property ownership outside Fernandina, where he worked his own farm.⁵¹⁰

Many people who hoped to benefit from rumors of federal land distribution found those promises unfulfilled. After President Lincoln's assassination, his successor, Andrew Johnson, outlined a vision of Reconstruction that did not include land redistribution but instead allowed White Southerners to reclaim their land. Republicans in Congress tried to pass laws to support and promote Black land ownership, such as the Southern Homestead Act. However, that act ultimately failed due to a lack of funds

⁵⁰⁹ *The New York Globe*, August 18, 1883.

⁵¹⁰ Thomas Long, Sergeant, Company G, 33rd USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; February Francis, Private, Company K, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Elias Lottery, Private, Company H, 33rd USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Last Will and Testament of February Shaw, 8 Nov. 1917, Probate Court Records, County Judge's Court, Duval County, Florida. Accessed through Ancestry.com: https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8993/records/289394?tid=&pid=&queryId=5c55ed99-a11b-4ba6-bf25-108dde4cb6d5&_phsrc=TsB1&_phstart=successSource.

to purchase land, the considerable labor needed to cultivate the land, and violence from local Whites. Blacks in Northeast Florida did find some success with the Swamp Selection Act of 1850. This law granted land to squatters—people who lived on and cultivated undeveloped wetlands along rivers like the St. Johns—who lacked legal titles. Using this approach, Blacks established small communities like Cosmo and Fulton. In these isolated, semi-autonomous areas, the culture and traditions of the Gullah Geechee people persisted continued.⁵¹¹

Many veterans failed to experience the same degree of success as Long, February, and Lottery. Despite the influx of investment into Northeast Florida from Northerners, Blacks faced racial discrimination in the job market, including lower rates of pay. Additionally, many of the veterans carried with them lingering injuries and illnesses that continued to plague them and make it difficult or impossible to work. Henry Houston (21st USCI) reunited with this wife, Priscilla, and two daughters after the war and moved to Yellow Bluff, Duval County, Florida. During Reconstruction, Houston worked as a farm laborer, likely on a tenant farm, and as a fisherman. Lingering respiratory illness contracted during the war while performing “double duty” in water on Morris Island, South Carolina, afflicted him throughout the rest of his life and hampered his ability to work. A friend of Houston’s, Judge Johnson, first met Houston in 1874 and

⁵¹¹ Richard Edwards, “African Americans and the Southern Homestead Act,” *Great Plains Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2019): 103–30; Warren Hoffnagle, “The Southern Homestead Act: Its Origins and Operation,” *The Historian*, vol. 32, no. 4 (1970): 612; Michael L. Lanza, *Agrarianism and Reconstruction Politics: The Southern Homestead Act* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 16–17; Twenty-First Congress, Session I, *An Act to enable the State of Arkansas and other States to reclaim the “Swamp Lands” within their limits* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1850): 519–20; Ennis Davis, “Six Gullah Geechee Neighborhoods in Jacksonville,” *Modern Cities.com*, <https://www.moderncities.com/article/2022-feb-six-gullah-geechee-neighborhoods-in-jacksonville>; Lyn Corley, *Conversations from Cosmo: Transcriptions of Oral History Recordings from Residents and Neighbors of the Community of Cosmo, Florida*, Special Collections, Jacksonville Public Library.

noted in an affidavit for Houston's pension that Houston always struggled with respiratory issues and that those issues made him "unable to do any manual labor."⁵¹² Upon Houston's death in 1886, his wife had little means to support herself. In another similar case, Alonzo Phillips (21st USCI) contracted intestinal issues from his military service that afflicted him after the war. An 1891 medical examination noted that he continued to suffer from biliousness and diarrhea and that at 48 years old, he only weighed 118 pounds. The surgeon wrote in the examination that Phillips "is emaciated." As a result of these lingering ailments, Phillips could not support himself through manual labor.⁵¹³

Completely or partially unable to work, men like Houston and Phillips turned to the federal government in order to receive a pension for their service. In his work, *The Families' Civil War*, historian Holly A. Pinheiro, argues that the complicated and racial pension policies of the federal government made it difficult for USCI veterans to receive the financial assistance they merited for their service.⁵¹⁴ While racial discrimination did not exist in the language of the various pension laws enacted during the post-war period, de facto racial bias existed in the procedures of the pension process. Fields-Black notes as such in her description of the pension system as "confusing and

⁵¹² Henry Houston, Private, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁵¹³ Alonzo Phillips, Sergeant, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁵¹⁴ Holly A. Pinheiro Jr., *The Families' Civil War: Black Soldiers and the Fight for Racial Justice* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2022). See also Larry M. Logue and Peter Blanck, *Race, Ethnicity, and Disability, Veterans and Benefits in Post-Civil War America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Elizabeth Regosin, *Freedom's Promise: Ex-Slave Families and Citizenship in the Age of Emancipation* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002); Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Elizabeth A. Regosin and Donald R. Shaffer, eds., *Voices of Emancipation: Understanding Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction through the U.S. Pension Bureau Files* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Brandi Clay Brimmer, *Claiming Union Widowhood: Race, Respectability, and Poverty in the Post-Emancipation South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

convoluted, particularly for the overwhelmingly illiterate veterans and widows whose lives were little documented in the kind of paperwork that the federal government's bureaucracy would recognize."⁵¹⁵ The case of James Eulin's wife, Annie, and her efforts to receive a widow's pension offers an anecdotal example. For any pension case, applicants had to demonstrate several facts to gain approval, including proof of military service, a connection between injury or illness and their service, and, for widows, evidence of marriage.⁵¹⁶ When James and Annie married near the end of the war, they did not have a marriage certificate. Such circumstances commonly occurred for Black veterans who married before, during, or shortly after the war. Since Southern states had not recognized marriages of enslaved people and often did not issue marriage certificates, many of these couples had no legal documentation of their marriages. This created significant problems for Annie, as she had no proof of their marriage and had to depend on witness testimony. Houston's wife faced a similar challenge in proving her marriage, as they did not have an official certificate but only a paper from the minister who performed the ceremony. The lack of documentation and literacy issues, among other factors, created obstacles that disproportionately affected Black veterans, especially the formerly enslaved.⁵¹⁷

Additionally, the racial biases and attitudes of federal agents could directly impact the approval process for pensions. Pension applications requiring special investigations

⁵¹⁵ Fields-Black, *Combee*, 496.

⁵¹⁶ The need to prove that the injury or disease came as a result of their military service only existed prior to 1890; after the passing of the Dependent Pension Act of 1890, veterans with a disability could receive a pension regardless of whether it came from their military service, "The Dependent Pension Act," *New York Times*, June 29, 1890.

⁵¹⁷ James Eulin, Corporal, Company F, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Henry Houston, Private, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Pinheiro, *The Families' Civil War*, 125.

highlighted these prejudices most clearly. Due to the lack of documentation needed for her widow's pension, the Pension Bureau ordered a special investigation for Annie's claim. This process involved a federal agent visiting the claimant's community and conducting interviews with the applicant and witnesses. Afterward, the agents compiled a witness list and a report. The report included the agents' assessments of the witnesses' reliability. In his final report, special investigator William Lochien described Annie and her mostly Black witnesses—including some Civil War veterans—as “abundantly unreliable.”⁵¹⁸ Charlotte, the wife of Edward Langley, underwent a similar special investigation to verify her marriage. The final report explicitly disparaged Charlotte as “an ignorant, stupid colored woman,” and called her youngest child, Ernestine, the “only intelligent member of the family.”⁵¹⁹ This prejudice reflects the different forms of racism these soldiers endured from their White officers during their military service. Just as the racial biases of officers significantly influenced the military careers of Black soldiers under their command, ongoing racial prejudice by federal agents could result in the rejection of pension claims, undermining the veterans' financial stability and economic freedoms, and those of their families.⁵²⁰

Despite facing ongoing racial opposition, these veterans exercised their agency to secure the benefits they believed they deserved for their service. In many cases,

⁵¹⁸ James Eulin, Corporal, Company F, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁵¹⁹ Edward Langley, Private, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Fields-Black, *Combee*, xxv.

⁵²⁰ Pinheiro, *The Families' Civil War*, 2, 125-126. For additional reading about the struggle for pensions for Black soldiers, see Donald Shaffer, *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004); Larry M. Louge and Peter Blanck, *Race, Ethnicity, and Disability: Veterans and Benefits in Post-Civil War America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Brandi Clay Brimmer, *Claiming Union Widowhood: Race, Respectability, and Poverty in the Post-Emancipation South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Fields-Black, *Combee*.

these veterans and their wives persistently submitted multiple applications for pensions or pension increases despite previous rejections. Because many of these men were illiterate, their diligent efforts required numerous trips to local courthouses to fill out forms, give depositions, and produce witness testimonies. Sometimes, the struggle for their pensions and economic stability lasted for decades. Luckily, in this ongoing fight, these veterans drew strength from strong kinship ties formed during their service or even earlier, while they were enslaved. Most of the pension applications from these men include multiple statements and testimonies from comrades they served with. These statements often mention regular, sometimes daily, contact between the men. Men like Stephen Wright and Henry Hannahan served as witnesses for various soldiers they had served with and kept close contact with since the war. In the changing landscape of the Reconstruction Era, these men continued to rely on kinship networks to resist oppression and forge spaces of freedom and equality.⁵²¹

The persistent specter of racism not only manifested in attempts to limit their freedom but also led to acts of violence by White southerners, such as in the case of Mary Alena Francis, the wife of February. After February's first wife died, he married Mary Alena Diggs in 1914. The couple owned and operated a flower nursery called Wonderpark Nursery near St. Nicholas. After February's death, sometime between 1917 and 1920, Mary remarried J.C. Malphus and continued running the nursery.

⁵²¹ Edward Langley, Private, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; February Francis, Private, Company K, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; James Eubanks, Private, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; James Eulin, Corporal, Company F, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; George Floyd, Private, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Henry Houston, Private, Company A, 21st USCI, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Record Group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Around the time of February's death, a white man named C. T. Tresca tried to buy the land where the nursery stood. He owned land next to the property and repeatedly asked Mary to sell it, despite her repeated refusals. The dispute eventually went to civil court, which sided with Mary and promised to protect her property. On Wednesday, January 20, 1926, Tresca took matters into his own hands. As Mary returned from paying taxes at the tax collector's office and attending various meeting in town, a mob of armed White men invaded their home and attacked the couple. The attackers claimed to be sheriffs aiming to arrest them for trespassing, with some in the mob wearing soldiers' uniforms. They blindfolded the couple and pushed them outside, where the rest of the mob waited. Once at the front gate, one man grabbed Mary, tied her up, and shoved her into a car. They drove her to a nearby dense woods where the attackers ripped off her clothes, bound her arms, and threw her on the ground. During the assault, her blindfold fell, and she caught a glimpse of Tresca. Forcing her husband to watch at gunpoint, the men flogged Mary, rubbed salt, pepper, and dirt all over her body, and coated her skin with tar and feathers. The attackers eventually left Mary and her husband three miles from their home, telling them to leave Jacksonville. An onlooker saw their condition and called the police, who did little beyond offering to help them reach the ferry or bus. After a lengthy recovery, Mary learned that Tresca had taken the property. She filed a civil lawsuit for trespassing, initially winning. However, Tresca's appeal led to a hung jury. No newspapers in Jacksonville or Northeast Florida covered the crime; rather, details of the incident appeared in *The New York Age*, an African American newspaper.⁵²²

⁵²² "Verbatim Story of Brutal Flogging and Tarring and Feathering of Woman Who Would Not Sell Her Land," *The New York Age*, 13 August 1927.

This horrifying experience highlights the violent threat Blacks faced in Northeast Florida and across the South. But just as important as her victimization by a white mob, the story also shows the courageous resistance Mary displayed in bringing the case to court multiple times. As Black men and women in this region had demonstrated during slavery, in their fight for emancipation, through their military service, and during Reconstruction, they used their agency to resist oppression and aspired to a freedom that continually developed and expanded. That freedom, as Foner argues, “for African-Americans...was an open-ended process, a broad, multifaceted concept, a millennial transformation of every facet of their lives.”⁵²³ In their search to achieve the freedom they understood, these men and women influenced dramatic changes during the war and afterward. However, the battle on many fronts that they faced during the war would continue to shape their lives to some extent. Through all the complexity and tumultuous changes they experienced, they remained steadfast in their pursuit of a freedom that they defined.

⁵²³ Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 103.

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