

JOHN R. SELLERS

THE UNION SOLDIER MEETS THE FREEDMAN

It would be reasonable to assume that Federal soldiers fighting in the South during the Civil War responded humanely to the needs of the thousands of displaced and often destitute Freedmen who roamed the countryside or attempted to eke out an existence on some abandoned plantation.¹ Unfortunately, that was not the case. Most of the men in blue, particularly those in the lower ranks, hated and sometimes abused black people. Many behaved as if the war had completely destroyed their ability to recognize, much less respond compassionately to human suffering. It is true that individual officers, or more often their wives, taught personal servants to read and write during the long winter encampments.² It was also not too uncommon for rank-and-file soldiers to offer part of their rations to needy blacks, especially if such action evoked an exchange of poultry or some coveted vegetable, or even if it involved only the free preparation of their main meal, but these acts were the exception rather than the rule. The average Union soldier seemed either blind or indifferent to the condition and aspirations of Freedmen.

Ironically, perhaps the strongest evidence of this lack of concern for freed people by northern soldiers in general is the fact that the existence of blacks is scarcely noted in their letters and diaries. Considering the ubiquitous presence of freed people, particularly in the lower South following the wholesale "refuging" of slaves southward at the beginning of the war, and the fact that most Federal soldiers were first-time observers of black life and culture, this is indeed strange. When black people did enter the picture, it was often in incidental fashion, as background figures in the sketches of magazine illustrators, or shadowy images in camp photographs. Soldiers writing home from the war zone were more likely to comment on the weather than the euphoria of liberated slaves. The changing official focus of the war from a struggle for Union to the eradication of chattel



The Civil War brought northern soldiers in contact with large numbers of recently freed African-Americans, often for the first time. The response from this army of liberation was not always sympathetic.

Courtesy Norlands Living History Center

slavery makes this oversight even more surprising.

When the men in blue did write about Freedmen, their remarks were generally critical. They tended to center their attention on bizarre or freakish behavior of individual blacks, such as a young mother abandoning her suckling child along a country road in order to keep pace with marching soldiers. Officers enjoying the assistance of volunteer or low-paid black servants hinted that they might take a "little Nig" or "darkie" home after the war. Insensitive to the realities of bondage and racial oppression, a surprising number of soldiers described blacks in their letters as far better off than most white people in the North. Some claimed that slaves and Freedmen had about as much money as the average northerner and performed less work.

Nor did Blacks' service in the Union army improve their standing with northern soldiers. Although not specifically excluded in President Abraham Lincoln's initial call for volunteers, black men, free or slave, were not welcome into the ranks



Black recruits boarding railroad cars to join the Federal army. Although blacks reveled in their new status as freedmen and as soldiers, their service did not improve their standing with northern soldiers

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of the Federal army. Attitudes in Washington changed in the summer and fall of 1862 with the increasing demand for men. Blacks were subsequently recruited in south Louisiana, the Sea Islands of Georgia, and South Carolina. Black soldiers were quick to discover, however, that they were only moving from one white-dominated hierarchy to another, and that both systems assumed their inherent inferiority. Discipline was unusually harsh; they were assigned menial duty; and they were paid on a lower scale than whites. They were also regimentally segregated and denied commissions. Most black soldiers were issued arms reluctantly, if at all. Their pay, though initially up to scale, was cut in half owing to the vigorous complaints of jealous whites. Many white volunteers even resented the distribution of military rations. Black soldiers marched and slept separately from whites, and their sick and wounded were attended and housed in separate, unequal facilities.

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Initially, commissions in black regiments, open only to whites, went begging as white officers considered the positions undignified. But the opportunity for rapid promotion and increased income did not go unnoticed among officers below field grade, and these men flooded the United States Congress with requests for appointments in the new Negro regiments. The Freedmen themselves seemed undaunted. They flocked to the nearest enlistment center, pointing the way to others en route. In states like Kentucky, where pro-Union planters could still legally own slaves, military service guaranteed blacks freedom by placing them permanently out of the reach of slave owners. Recruiters in the lower South had to reject hundreds of solicitous black volunteers.

Successful black volunteers reveled in their new status. Black companies sometimes surpassed whites in strength and appearance. But regardless of how hard they trained or how well they fought, they were looked upon as inferior or unreliable by white units, if not viewed with open derision. Objective observers like Dr. Charles Henry Nichols, superintendent of the government hospital for the insane in Washington (St. Elizabeths) asserted that black soldiers "learn the drill as quickly as soldiers generally do." Dr. Nichols found blacks fond of military display, and he asserted that what was once "rightly & thoroughly learned" by blacks was well retained.

In south Louisiana white soldiers enjoyed paying unsuspecting and unlearned black farmers for produce with worthless Confederate money, considering the deception a good joke. Federal officers sometimes seized the most attractive black women and girls as mistresses, while common soldiers slipped away under cover of darkness to a nearby Freedman's camp to gratify their lust.irate black leaders would appeal to senior Union officers to put a stop to the sexual abuse of their womenfolk, but with mixed success. Some officers refused to cooperate out of indifference; others feared to risk the good will of their men, many of whom were not above threatening their officers with "crossfiring" – the deliberate shooting of officers in the heat of battle.

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Obviously, under the emotional impact of emancipation, many black women were willing participants in intercourse with solicitous white soldiers, but such affairs rarely worked to their advantage. If they became ill or otherwise unable to travel, they were frequently left to their own resources in unfamiliar surroundings. Some died in the mud of an abandoned military camp. At the same time, those that rebuffed the soldiers' advances sometimes paid with their lives. Dr. Esther Hill Hawks, a medical and educational missionary working among freed people along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, reported that black mothers were known to have been shot while attempting to prevent their teenage daughters from being ravished.

Educational missionaries and Sanitary Commission workers made themselves unpopular with Union soldiers because of their close association with Freedmen. Most Union officers opposed racially mixed schools and discouraged local white children from attending the integrated commission schools. In South Carolina and Georgia, Federal officers went so far as to approve the demand of Confederates that white observers be placed in all schools taught by educated black women. The observers were to report any suspicious teaching or activity. Adding insult to injury, the observers were to be paid by the school or institution they monitored, even though they did no other work.

Deadly diseases such as scarlet fever, typhoid, smallpox, diphtheria, and dysentery plagued crowded Freedmen camps though the southern states, causing the deaths of thousands of runaway slaves and Freedmen. Camp Reno on North Carolina's Roanoke Island accommodated an estimated 30,000 runaway slaves and Freedmen in early 1863, but the camp was virtually devoid of life by late 1864. Today perhaps the only sure proof of the camp's brief existence is the plethora of human bones being unearthed by historical archaeologists. Obviously, many, if not most of the slaves and Freedmen that found sanctuary on the inhospitable island died within a few months of their arrival.

Federal soldiers capitalized on the good will of most southern blacks by utilizing them as bearers. Those who could not

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acquire bearers or “toters” voluntarily usually hired or compelled blacks along their routes of march to carry their pack and accouterments. On one particular march in south central Louisiana, virtually every white soldier had a bearer. The soldiers were careful, however, not to surrender their rifles, and to avoid having to share their camp and rations, they would routinely relieve their bearers toward the end of the march.

White soldiers also objected to the late-night jubilees of Freedmen – the spontaneous dancing and singing in celebrating emancipation. When the soldiers grew tired of such commotion, they would attempt to frighten the revelers into silence by charging their camps in the middle of the night with screams and shouts and guns ablaze. Inevitably, the dancers, men, women, and children, scattered into the dark woods in all directions. Little wonder that one sympathetic soldier, having just observed the severe beating of a mulatto man for daring to return some vile epithets hurled at him by the men of Company A, 177th New York Volunteers, wrote:

“It is astonishing what an amount of negro hatred exists in the Co[mpany] & Reg[imen]t. No insults are too gross to be heaped upon them.”³

Rank in the Union Army was no guarantor of liberal ity toward blacks. Early in the war President Abraham Lincoln rescinded the orders of Generals John C. Fremont and David Hunter freeing slaves in their respective fields of command. Even the much heralded Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, was as much a strategy for victory as an act of benevolence. Lincoln was committed first to maintaining the Union. He embraced emancipation only after it became politically and militarily feasible. To him, arguments that emancipation denied considerable manpower to the Confederacy while directly and indirectly augmenting Union forces were especially compelling. It is common knowledge that General George B. McClellan stoutly opposed the seizure of property in the South, slaves included, and was quick to return



Johnson, THE STORY OF THE GREAT CONFLICT (1898)

black runaways. Officers stationed along the South Atlantic coast displayed little remorse in operating abandoned cotton plantations in much the same manner as their former white occupants, and such attitudes did not go unnoticed among the rank and file. In fact, most soldiers welcomed the opportunity to profit off blacks. One who did not was foreign-born Joseph Lester, a private in the 6th Battery, Wisconsin Volunteers. On November 1, 1862, at Corinth, Mississippi, Lester confessed:

I admit that so far the conduct of the War has not come up to my expectations, as our Generals are as tainted with the same taint the Rebels are: a desire for the breaking up of Republican Institutions and planting upon their "Ruins" Monarchical Government, and the crushing out of Free thought and Speech. Also the extension of Slavery. [But] My Faith is not the least shaken about the "Ultimate" success of our Arms, and a General will be found soon to lead us to Victory.¹

It was the escaped Federal prisoner of war that most appreciated black people, and with good reason. Soldiers attempting to travel northward through enemy territory were

almost totally dependent upon slaves for sustenance and direction, and they were seldom disappointed. Aware that slaves did their courting at night, escapees hid along a road or path shortly after dark – daytime travel being much too dangerous – and attempted to persuade the first slave they saw to assist them. Generally the slaves would provide whatever food they could spare and direct the soldiers to the nearest field, if edible crops were to be had. Occasionally, a slave would lead an escapee the ten or so miles with which he was familiar, even though this brought considerable risk. Planters knew that this was taking place, and often they would arrange for an unknown person to play the role of an escapee in order to trick the suspected collaborator. If the ruse worked, the slave was sure to be beaten or shot on the spot.

Northerners continued and even expanded the derogatory naming of blacks, showing particular fondness for the ever popular Pluto, Plato, and Socrates, and famous biblical characters such as Solomon, Moses, and Elijah. Whether conscious or unconscious, this type of labeling denigrated blacks, in part because of the striking contrast between their mean lives and their namesakes, which encouraged condescension by well-intentioned whites.

Convalescent northerners reacted negatively to the care given sick and wounded black soldiers. Thinking black casualties less worthy of medical attention, these white soldiers would throw stones, nails, and scraps of iron gleaned from the regimental blacksmith at mending blacks. The Negroes were seldom at liberty to return such insults, although there is little doubt that they were deeply felt. When questioned on the subject, Private Charlie Reason, a twenty-year-old runaway slave from Maryland, who was recovering from wounds received in the now famous attack on Fort Wagner, explained: "I came to fight *not* for my country, I never had any, but to gain one." Regrettably, a short time later one of Reason's legs had to be amputated because of gangrene poisoning, and he did not survive the ordeal. In death, Reason was probably indistinguishable from his tormentors, for he was a man of mixed blood and fair skin.⁵

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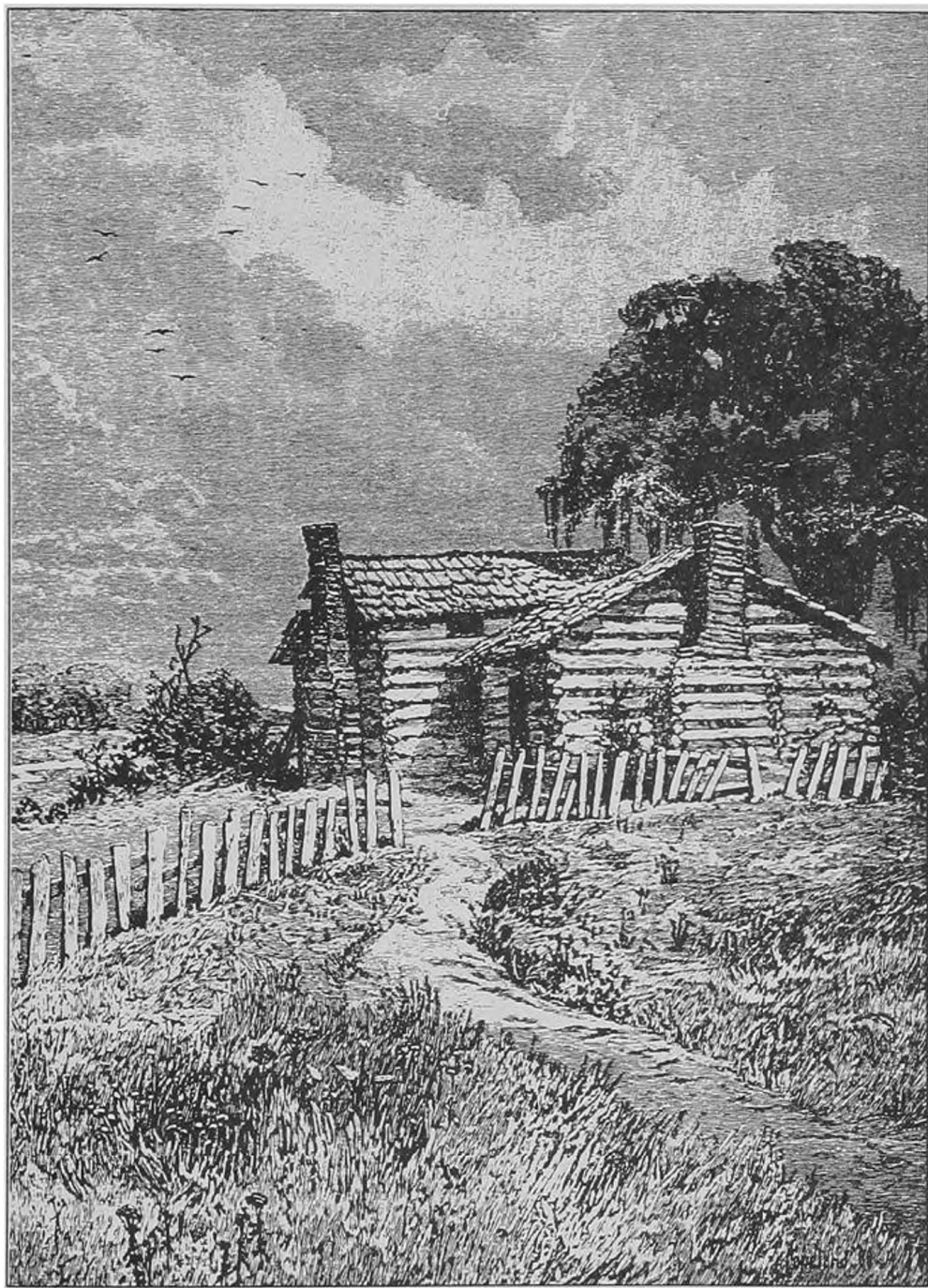
One Union officer who rose above the racist behavior of most of his comrades-in-arms was Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, commander of the 54th Massachusetts. Shaw was viewed with something akin to adoration by the men of the 54th, which was a highly effective Negro regiment. After treating the wounds and listening to the concerns of several convalescent soldiers from the 54th, each of whom had been involved in the disastrous assault on Fort Wagner, Dr. Esther Hawks reported:

The love which they all bear their young commander Col. Shaw has something of the divine in it. And for several days their first eager question to me as I passed from one to another in the early morning would be "Do you hear any news from Morris Island? Anything of our Colonel! They never tired of talking about him."⁶

First Sergeant John Morgan said of Colonel Shaw's death, "I suppose his friends will consider it a great disgrace for him to lie buried with a lot of niggers but if they know how all his men loved him, they would never wish to take him to any other resting place."⁷

There is little doubt that the limited educational experience of freed people invited economic and physical abuse. However, not all former slaves were uneducated. In some areas of the deep South, living standards and educational levels of blacks surpassed that of many indigenous whites. Federal officials visiting with blacks along the Atlantic Seaboard were surprised to find the homes clean and neat. The Negroes had few possessions, but they seemed happy. Moreover, they were anxious that their children learn to read. In northern Florida, local blacks impressed northern visitors and missionaries as intelligent and energetic. The missionaries claimed that many blacks in northern Florida had at least a rudimentary education, and that it was not uncommon to find what they described as a fair reader in their midst. Actually, the lowest people on the social ladder throughout the southeast were the ones frequently referred to as

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Federal officials visiting blacks' homes along the Atlantic Seaboard were surprised to find their standards of living and education higher than that of many local whites.

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“Crackers.” Dr. Hawks described these “mud sill” whites as “much less human than the negroes, more ignorant, dirty and lifeless.” To Hawks, Florida Crackers looked as though they had been buried for several months and dug up again. Their hair, skin, and dirty, faded, butternut clothes seemed of one piece.⁸

In view of the frustration evident in the everyday lives of Freedman during the Civil War, the optimism and courage they displayed is worth recording. But not all Freedmen could bear the disappointment of continued and seemingly endless servitude. One who could not was a nameless and now forgotten old man who had spent his entire life as a slave. It is unclear just how old he was, only that his hair was gray and that he appeared old. Doubtless he had been born a slave.

Despite frequent and strident Confederate warnings that Negroes would suffer more at the hands of Yankees than as slaves, the old man acted upon a rumor that the Federal blockade steamers anchored along the Carolina coast offered sanctuary and freedom. But reaching a steamer was no mean feat. Fearing the loss of property and labor, Confederate authorities attempted to block this avenue of escape. South Carolinians took the extreme measure of destroying or rendering unserviceable all small craft along their beaches and tributaries.

It is unclear whether the old man fully comprehended the difficulties he would face as a fugitive, but he seemed not to care. Sometime in the fall of 1862 he made a bid for freedom, escaping into the vast tidal swamps along the lower Waccamaw River, which opens into Winyaw Bay below modern Georgetown. Undaunted by the absence of a serviceable boat, he began fabricating a dugout canoe. Normally, the task would take two or three weeks, but with foraging for food, hiding from Confederate militia patrols, fending off swarms of insects, avoiding poisonous snakes, and simply staying warm at night, ten months went by before the tiny vessel was deemed seaworthy. Finally, early one June morning in 1863, with a Federal steamer on the horizon and his tattered shirt hoisted on a bent staff as a flag of truce, the old man paddled quietly down river and out into Winyaw Bay.



An army laundry establishment. In many cases, freedmen understood that emancipation simply meant exchanging one form of servitude for another.

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The commanding officer of the USS *Conemaugh*, which had been on station in Winyaw Bay for several weeks, was Captain Robert Wilson Shufeldt, formerly Consul General to Cuba. Captain Shufeldt observed the approaching canoe with its single occupant, and welcomed the old Negro aboard the *Conemaugh* with the assurance that he was indeed a free man. Shufeldt then sent his guest below deck to the ships' galley for breakfast. But when the Negro attempted to find a seat among several hardened deck hands – men routinely recruited in waterfront dens in New York and Philadelphia – he was ordered away. These were people who, as Shufeldt explained, “thought they were better than a d–n nigger anyhow.” Stung into an awareness from the faces around him that he would never be truly free, that emancipation was just a hoax, and that his liberators were no different from his former master, the old man fought back, but against impossible odds. Probably he acquitted himself well, for a weak man could scarcely have survived what he had been through. But he died. Exactly how is unknown, but he may have been struck

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from behind with a fire axe, a ready tool or weapon on these early ships of war.

Shufeldt buried the old man at sea with the self-assuaging remark: "He is Free at Last." Then, obviously deeply moved, Shufeldt wrote:

Strange inconsistency – wonderful paradox! Our tears have flown in continuous streams for the poor African slave – but not a word of pity is heard for the hundreds who perish in the trenches – or worse still for the women and children who die daily from starvation and neglect.

Contraband indeed! Unfortunate Ethiopian – unless you can change your skin – you will find no practical sympathy from the white man – Either in the North or in the South – in the one you are doomed to slavery – in the other to social ostracism....I know that the Negro is at once the fountain and origin of our evils...that he stands in the way of an inexorable destiny *but he* is innocent in all this; He neither made himself a slave – nor has he made the effort to become free. He is simply the victim of a law of progress – which neither he nor we can control....I protest that I have no prejudice of color – I have enjoyed the intellectual society of many great and good negroes – in Liberia and in St. Domingo – and yet with that detestable weakness which makes man cower to men – I have shrunk from contact with colored men in America.

I am no advocate for miscegenation – I believe that social distinctions ought to exist and that a mixture of these races would be an unmixed evil – but in the name of God – treat the Negro as if he were human – possessed by the same hopes – actuated by the same fears – and if your religion is true an inheritor in common with yourself of all that Heaven can offer!⁹

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Although Shufeldt did not play a direct role in this tragedy, he epitomizes the attitudes of a broad spectrum of American society toward blacks in the nineteenth century. His diplomatic career had taught him much about slavery. He knew the names of several New York merchants secretly engaged in the slave trade, merchants who bought aging ships to transport slaves and loaded them with rough-cut oak lumber for later use in constructing the multiple slave decks, barrels of whiskey to exchange with African warlords for the return human cargo, and rice to feed the hapless victims during the return voyage. Shufeldt knew firsthand the hypocrisy of the British naval officers assigned to enforce England's ban on the African slave trade. He knew about the night voyages up African rivers for the secret loading of slaves and water, and he could even detail the amount of money each member of the crew could expect after the slaves were sold and the ship scuttled for want of a legitimate manifest. Yet throughout life, Shufeldt remained an ardent advocate of forced emigration – the expatriation of the Negro.¹⁰

Another example of the squelched hope of Freedmen during the Civil War took place in Louisiana. Both before and during the Civil War, planters in the border states disposed of particularly recalcitrant or physically threatening slaves by selling them to sugar planters in this area. There they suffered unusually high mortality. Prices for slaves were high in the area, and owners bent on personal retribution were assured of satisfaction. Perry, who was born a slave on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, was sold as a young man to a Louisiana sugar planter, possibly for no other reason than his enormous size, but he later demonstrated that he also had a mind of his own by running away. He lived in a vast swamp for nearly a year before returning to the plantation out of pure loneliness.

Perry simply appeared one day at the camp of the 12th Connecticut Volunteer Regiment. Lieutenant Colonel Frank H. Peck found Perry taking care of his two horses, and for the next two years that task was his single trust in life. Perry loved horses. As Lt. Col. Peck explained, "No deadlier sin could be committed

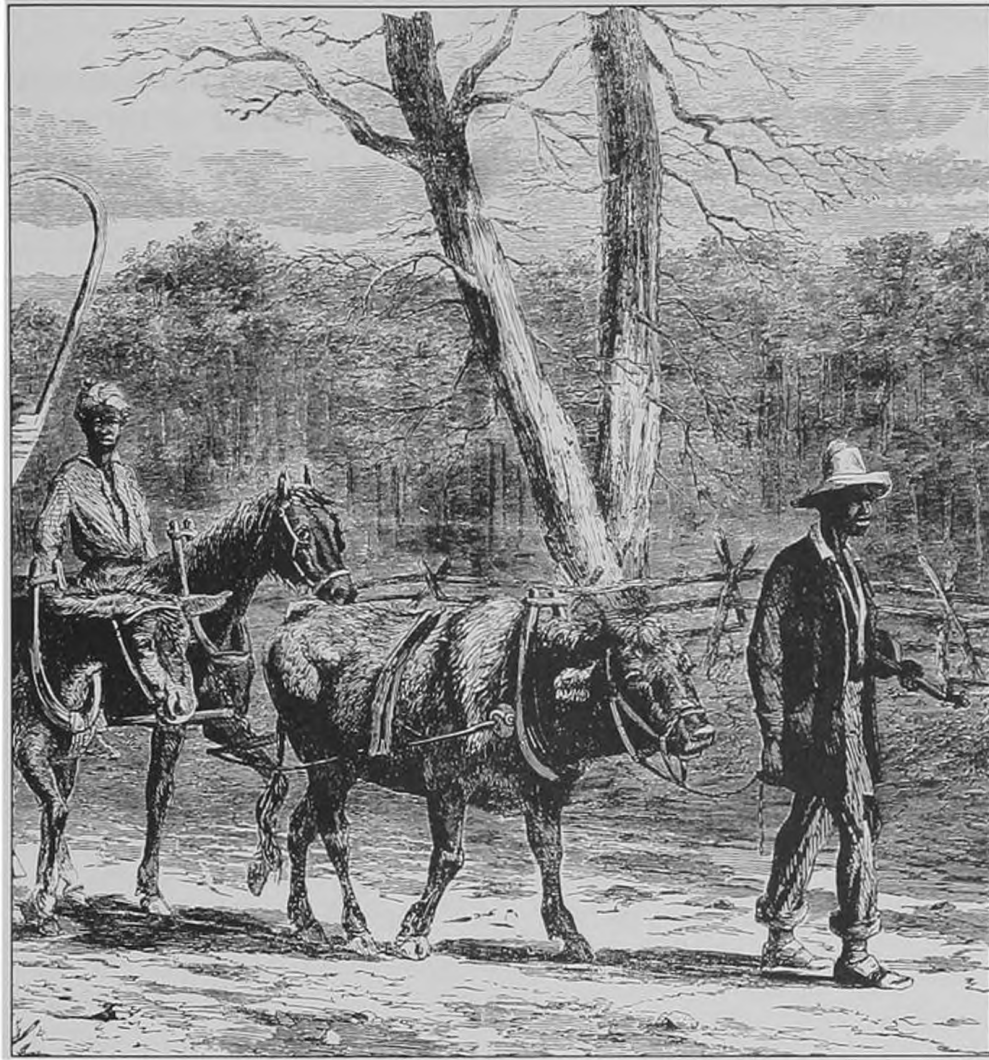
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in his eyes than to strike a horse." At night, Perry regularly tied the captain's mounts to a single stake and slept between them. If horse thieves were known to be in the area, he would tie one horse to one of his feet and the other to his neck, much to the consternation of the entire regiment. Horse thieves were common in the state, but according to Peck, they avoided Perry.¹¹

This black "Sampson" was also the champion of what Peck described as "the oppressed darkeys in the camp." His particular gesture when one Freedman mistreated another was to take the bully gently by the nape of the neck and the seat of the trousers and deposit him in the nearest mud puddle. He preferred a bayou if one were not too distant. Evidently, lifting and heaving heavy loads was something Perry could accomplish with ease. Peck described his powers: "What all the rest couldn't do he took great pride in doing alone."¹²

Colonel Peck claimed that Perry had risked his life for him many times during the two years they were together, and he doubted that any of his white friends would have done the same. He cited an incident during a skirmish at Labadieville in which he looked behind to find his stable man standing not twenty yards away with his second horse. To Peck's astonishment, Perry had been following him under fire for half a mile. When scolded for such needless exposure, Perry responded, "It didn't make no difference."¹³

Perry later joked about the incident, claiming that he had thrown himself flat on the ground early in the engagement only to see a soldier get shot in the heel, whereupon he decided that was no place for a "nigger's" head. But we should not ignore the possibility that Perry's response to life-threatening situations was more a reflection of the hopelessness of his own life. He was too intelligent to miss the fact that conditions for black people in the South had not changed appreciably. Undoubtedly Perry understood that blacks were relegated to servitude with or without slavery. Sadly, he disappeared shortly after Lt. Col. Peck returned home to Connecticut on furlough in the winter of 1864. Another officer took temporary possession of Peck's horses, both of which he proceeded to abuse, something Perry could not



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stand to watch. Peck returned in May to find his horses in pitiful condition, and he spent several weeks searching for his “boy,” who had not liked what he termed “dis comin back business.” Peck had just located Perry and was preparing to get him when word came that the trusted servant was dead.¹¹ Peck himself was mortally wounded three months later.¹⁵

A third and final example of the courage and hope of Freedmen can be seen in the life of a black military scout. The scout worked directly for Brigadier General Eliakim P. Scammon, who commanded the District of Florida in the final months of the war. According to General

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Scammon, the scout, a former slave, turned in lengthy intelligence reports that were better written than those of his white counterparts. He also never returned to headquarters without one or more Confederate prisoners of war. Confederate authorities thought enough of the man to offer a \$3,000 reward for his capture. General Scammon paid him \$100 a month, more than ten times the pay of the average black volunteer, and Scammon claimed the man was worth five times that amount. When asked how he learned to write, the scout responded, "I stole it sir, little by little, when I was on the plantation."¹⁶

General Scammon proudly requested a commission for his most productive recruit, but it was never granted. Doubtless the scout continued to serve despite the lack of recognition from higher-ups, for like most freed people, he understood the pervasiveness of race stereotypes – both north and south. As time has shown, it was a problem would not readily go away. Black Americans had always hoped for real freedom, but we can only begin to imagine the courage they showed throughout history as they watched how slowly the wheels of justice turned.

NOTES

¹his essay is based almost entirely on the first-hand observations of hundreds of regular and volunteer Union soldiers. The list of manuscript collections consulted is so long that readers are referred instead to the topical index in John R. Sellers, *Civil War Manuscripts: A Guide to Collections in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress* (Washington, 1986). Readers are also referred to Bell Irvin Wiley's *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company).

²Semiliterate letters of gratitude appear in the collected papers of several Civil War officers.

³Henry Graham Memoir, April 28, 1863.

⁴Joseph Lester to his father and sister, Corinth, Mississippi, November 1, 1862.

⁵Gerald Schwartz, ed., *A Woman Doctor's Civil War: Esther Hill Hawks' Diary* (University of South Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 51-52. Esther Hawks' papers are in the Library of Congress.

⁶Schwartz, ed., *A Woman Doctor's Civil War*, p. 54.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., pp. 108-9.

⁹Frederick C. Drake, *Empire of the Seas: A Biography of Admiral Robert Wilson Shufeldt, USN* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), pp. 74-75.

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¹⁰Manuscript account of the African slave trade, Shufeldt Papers.

¹¹Lt. Col. Frank H. Peck to his mother, June 23, 1864, Montgomery Family Papers, Library of Congress.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵*Official Army Register of the Volunteer Force of the United States Army (New England States)*, p. 279.

¹⁶Schwartz, ed., *A Woman Doctor's Civil War*, p. 109.

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