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# "Somewhere Toward Freedom:" Sherman's March and Georgia's Refugee Slaves

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“SOMEWHERE TOWARD FREEDOM:” SHERMAN’S MARCH AND GEORGIA’S  
REFUGEE SLAVES

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Masters of Arts  
History

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by  
Ben Parten  
May 2017

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Vernon Burton, Committee Chair  
Dr. Lee Wilson  
Dr. Rod Andrew

## ABSTRACT

When General William T. Sherman's army marched through Georgia during the American Civil War, it did not travel alone. As many as 17,000 refugee slaves followed his army to the coast; as many, if not more, fled to the army but decided to stay on their plantations rather than march on. This study seeks to understand Sherman's march from their point of view. It argues that through their refugee experiences, Georgia's refugee slaves transformed the march into one for their own freedom and citizenship. Such a transformation would not be easy. Not only did the refugees have to brave the physical challenges of life on the march, they had to also exist within a war waged by white men. The refugees, therefore, were forced to legitimate their freedom in spite of the very people, institutions, and circumstances that made their emancipation possible. Resolving this conundrum represented the ongoing struggle of the march, and it would remain a struggle even after the refugees arrived Savannah. "Somewhere Toward Freedom" documents this tension from the moment the first refugees reached Sherman's army to their eventual resettlement on the Georgia coast.

## DEDICATION

To my parents, who made this all possible, and Hannah, who, in her own ways, also made this possible.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members, Drs. Vernon Burton, Lee Wilson, and Rod Andrew, for their support and thoughtful criticisms throughout this project. Without them, this thesis would be a shell of what it is today.

I also want to say a special thank you to my advisor, Dr. Vernon Burton, who, in some ways, deserves an acknowledgement section all to himself. His constant mentorship, deep friendship, and endless advice has made a lasting impact not just on this project, but who I am as a thinker, scholar, writer, and friend.

Dr. Paul Anderson should also be thanked. His door was always open whenever I was in need of direction or clarity. I would also like to thank Dr. Richard Saunders, my fellow graduate students, and my fiancé, Hannah, for being special friends and always providing a welcomed reprieve from thesis writing.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

In his history of Sherman's march, aptly entitled *Sherman's March Through the South: Sketches and Incidents of the Campaign*, Captain David P. Conyngham retold a story that he described as "too well authenticated" to be doubted. He recounted the story of a pious, North Georgia slave named Ostin. Much to his master Tom House's ire, Ostin reportedly preferred to sing the psalms rather than work. One day, in a drunken fit, House flogged Ostin for worshipping after being instructed not to. Later that night, Ostin took flight. He first visited his wife, who lived on a nearby plantation, before seeking refuge with the Union army. "They say our savor [sic] are coming," he told his wife, "And I go to meet the Bridegroom." Tragically, however, Ostin never reached his destination. Before reaching the army, House apprehended him and levied his punishment on the spot. He tied Ostin to a tree, pinning his arms back to fully expose his torso, and then unleashed his bloodthirsty hounds. After the dogs ravaged Ostin, House set the area around the slave's feet on fire, but his wet clothes would not burn. Finally, House wrapped a rope around Ostin's neck and suspended him from the hanging branches above.<sup>1</sup>

It is unclear how much of Ostin's story is apocryphal. But whether fact or fiction, the story of Ostin, captured and killed as he fled for the safety of Sherman's army, exemplifies a fundamental reality of Sherman's march to the sea—that the sight, sound,

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<sup>1</sup> David Power Conyngham, *Sherman's March Through the South: With Sketches and Incidents of the Campaign* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1865), 149–53.

and, in some cases, rumor of almost 62,000 Union soldiers romping through the state catalyzed the enslaved into action. What might have previously only been a latent desire for freedom manifested itself as enslaved men and women deserted their masters and embraced the Union army. The enslaved believed Sherman and his men to be a providential force sent to engender their long awaited emancipation. “They hailed us as deliverers,” one soldier recalled.<sup>2</sup> Another remembered seeing roadsides inundated with enslaved men and women, who prayed and shouted as if he and his fellow soldiers were “legions of the Lord of Hosts.”<sup>3</sup>

Expectations did not meet reality. According to the Emancipation Proclamation the army had a mandate to “recognize and maintain” what Lincoln called “actual freedom,” but “actual freedom” itself, remained undefined. And whatever responsibility the army may have had to enforce emancipation, its responsibilities ended there. According to General William T. Sherman’s official orders, refuge was not to be granted unless a freed man or woman could be incorporated into the army as either a cook or common laborer. The freed people, however, paid little heed to Sherman’s commands. From the young and healthy to the old and infirm, scores of refugee slaves fled to the army, and as many as 17,000 refugees followed the army as it marched on to Savannah.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Oscar L. (Oscar Lawrence) Jackson and David Prentice Jackson, *The Colonel’s Diary; Journals Kept before and during the Civil War by the Late Colonel Oscar L. Jackson of New Castle, Pennsylvania, Sometime Commander of the 63rd Regiment O. V. I* (Sharon Pa., 1922), 164.

<sup>3</sup> John Richards Boyle, *Soldiers True ; the Story of the One Hundred and Eleventh Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers and of Its Campaigns in the War for the Union, 1861-1865* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1903), 262.

<sup>4</sup> *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: 1880-1902), Series 1, Volume 44, 75, 159. The number of refugees who followed Sherman’s



Sherman and his men had no desire to make their march one of liberation, but by running from their plantations, the enslaved did so for them.

Indeed, through their experiences as refugees, Georgia's freed men and women transformed Sherman's march into one of black freedom and citizenship. While individual refugee experiences varied, African American men and women throughout the state acted in ways that secured their freedom and resolved their ill-defined relationship to the federal government. By the time the army reached Savannah, the refugees efforts would be recognized. Not only would they find committed allies in many of the soldiers, who, so far as one officer knew, had become "all abolitionists [sic]," but Sherman would issue his famous Field Order 15, which set aside the South Atlantic coastline exclusively for black landownership.<sup>5</sup> What the refugees called their "jubilee" seemingly came true, only to meet a tragic end. How these men and women braved the perils of life as a refugee while asserting their claims to freedom and citizenship is the central focus of this study.

A study of Georgia's refugee slaves is problematic because no two refugee experiences were the same. For every slave that followed Sherman to Savannah, others, like Ostin, refugeed themselves but never made it to the army. And for every slave that left for the presumed safety of Savannah, others, like the men Major Henry Hitchcock

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army was never certain, and an exact number will never be known. Various accounts will report sundry amounts, but this number, the one reported in the official records, will be cited in this essay.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Hendrick Fitch, *Echoes of the Civil War as I Hear Them* (New York: R. F. Fenno & company, 1905), 268-69.

encountered, desired to join the army but because of “the age of them all, and the rheumatics of this one, and the lameness of that one, and the families they all must leave” could not take such a risk.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the circumstances of Sherman’s march generated a range of refugee experiences, many of which complicate the recognized definition of a refugee. An unavoidable question must therefore be asked: Do these men and women fit the refugee paradigm?

The word “refugee” has a history of its own. It entered the English lexicon in reference to French Huguenots who fled from France after King Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Its use has since become more inclusive. In 1951, the United Nations codified the definition of refugeedom at their Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. According the U.N., a refugee was a person who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” Instances of persecution and transnational migration have since been deemed the definitive characteristics of the refugee experience. Refugee slaves, however, fit this construction uncomfortably. True, freed people lived in constant fear of persecution, but refugee slaves rarely crossed national borders as implied in the U.N. definition.

Arguments can be made about the Civil War creating new national boundaries, but to

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<sup>6</sup> Henry Hitchcock and M. A. De Wolfe Howe, *Marching with Sherman: Passages from the Letters and Campaign Diaries of Henry Hitchcock, Major and Assistant Adjutant General of Volunteers, November 1864-May 1865* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 127–28.

make such arguments is to miss the spirit of the U.N. qualification: to be a refugee was to be a migrant, to have been a person on the move.<sup>7</sup>

In this study, I use the terms “refugee” and “refugeedom,” but I do so according to a refugee paradigm that differs from the U.N. Whereas the U.N. based refugee status on the circumstances of one’s refugee experience, I identify one’s relationship to the state to be the essential quality of a refugee. As demonstrated by the men whom Major Hitchcock met, flight was not always synonymous with the refugee slave experience. Emancipation, itself, was a lived process that necessitated a multitude of situation specific decisions and corresponding actions. What was the best course for one enslaved person, was not always best for another. While flight may not have been a universal experience, all refugees did, however, share one commonality: they all had to grapple with the problems of their inherent statelessness. Indeed, freedom may have been the objective of a lifetime, but it nonetheless placed the refugees in a precarious position. Federal emancipation policy had not yet fashioned legal or political identities for the refugees to step into. All that was certain was that they were neither slaves in the Confederacy nor free citizens of the United States. Federal protection, therefore, could be expected but not guaranteed, placing the refugees in a vulnerable position. The question became not just how to exercise one’s freedom but how to legitimate it in a way that

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<sup>7</sup> See United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and Its 1967 Protocol,” *UNHCR*, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/about-us/background/4ec262df9/1951-convention-relating-status-refugees-its-1967-protocol.html>. Full text of the convention is available at [https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume 189/volume-189-I-2545-English.pdf](https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20189/volume-189-I-2545-English.pdf)

maintained its perpetuation and ensured one's own personal security. Resolving this issue was the universal conundrum of the refugee slave experience. Without a clear claim to citizenship, the refugees had to effectively create such a claim for themselves. For those who fled to Sherman's army, the most efficacious solution was to simply march and march they did.<sup>8</sup>

Identifying statelessness as the definitive quality of a refugee slave requires a reevaluation of Sherman's army and its relationship to the American State. According to German sociologist Max Weber, the State, broadly speaking, is the body from which legitimate force is applied. In his now famous essay "Politics as Vocation" he writes that a State is any "human community" which claims "a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."<sup>9</sup> Tearing through Georgia's countryside, razing

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<sup>8</sup> Refugee studies is still a new academic discipline. Its primary journal, *The Journal of Refugee Studies*, published its first issue in 1988. Yet even in its infancy the problem of terminology has been one of the field's central points of contention. In fact, Robert Zetter made it the primary theme of his editorial introduction to the *JRS*'s first edition. See Roger Zetter, "Refugees and Refugee Studies - A Label and an Agenda," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 1 (1988): 1. Most scholars now agree that the 1951 U.N. definition leaves much to be desired. Richard Black notes that it "reflects the designation of a refugee enshrined in a particular Convention at a particular time, within a particular international political and economic context." "As such," he concluded, "it could be argued to be devoided of any deeper academic meaning or explanatory power." See Richard Black, "Fifty Years of Refugee Studies: From Theory to Policy," *The International Migration Review* 35, no. 1 (2001): 57–78. Fortunately, there is now a rich literature that challenges the limiting qualifications set forth in the 1951 definition. Jerome Elie's contribution to the oxford handbook on Refugees provides a summary of this literature and urges historians to question the "uncritical use of legal categories." See Jerome Elie, "Histories of Refugee and Force Migration Studies," in Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, First Edition (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2014). For other studies that challenge refugee terminology, see B. S. Chimni, "The Birth of a 'Discipline': From Refugee to Forced Migration Studies," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 22, no. 1 (March 2009): 11–29.; Ilana Feldman, "The Challenge of Categories: UNRWA and the Definition of a 'Palestine Refugee,'" *Journal of Refugee Studies* 25, no. 3 (September 2012): 387–406.; Pamela Ballinger, "Entangled or 'Extruded' Histories? Displacement, National Refugees, and Repatriation after the Second World War," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 25, no. 3 (September 2012): 366–86.

<sup>9</sup> Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, Facet Books. Social Ethics Series, 3 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

its Greco-Roman mansions, ransacking its capitol, and, most importantly, freeing the enslaved, functioned as a visceral exertion of such a monopoly. As such, the Army of the Tennessee embodied the United States government in motion. Its tour through Georgia deconstructed, or as one soldier remarked, “disemboweled” the Confederate state, thereby verifying the federal government’s claim to sovereignty over its Southern counterpart.<sup>10</sup>

Sherman’s supposed scorched earth tactics have long since been synonymous with precepts of “Total War,” but the term is misleading.<sup>11</sup> Civilians were never combative targets. Confederate morale and the South’s already meager resources, however, were. That is not to say that heinous crimes against civilians or slaves were never committed, but as Historian Anne J. Bailey notes, “what Sherman brought to Georgia’s civilian population cannot compare with later events such as the firebombs dropped on the... cities of Hamburg, Dresden, and Tokyo in World War II.”<sup>12</sup> James McPherson agrees, concluding that Sherman lacked a “killer instinct” and “preferred to

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<sup>10</sup> Letter from John White Geary to his Wife, December 1864 in John White Geary, William Alan Blair, and Bell Irvin Wiley, *A Politician Goes to War: The Civil War Letters of John White Geary* (University Park, Penn: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 217.

<sup>11</sup> “Total War” was first applied to Sherman’s march in a *Journal of Southern History* article by John Bennett Walters. See John Bennett Walters, “General William T. Sherman and Total War,” *The Journal of Southern History* 14, no. 4 (1948): 447–80.; John Bennett Walters, *Merchant of Terror: General Sherman and Total War* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973). Recent scholarship, however, suggests that Sherman’s March and the Civil War at large was not a display of total war. See Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1995).; Mark E. Neely, “Was the Civil War a Total War?,” *Civil War History* 50, no. 4 (2004): 434–58.

<sup>12</sup> Anne J. Bailey, *War and Ruin: William T. Sherman and the Savannah Campaign*, The American Crisis Series (Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources, 2003), 135.

accomplish his strategic goals by maneuver rather than by all out combat.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, use of the term is misguided because it distances Sherman’s march from the federal government’s overall objective: a national reunion by way of a national reconstruction. Making unrestrained war on a defenseless populace would have harmed the U.S. government’s ability to forge a peaceful reconciliation with Georgia and by extension, the rest of the Confederate states. Unrestrained war would have also broken those sacred yet unspoken rules of war, making Sherman’s use of force irrational if not entirely *illegitimate*. Sherman’s march was thus not so much a display of total war as much as it was Weberian statecraft, an early battle in the war to reconstruct the American State.

The dearth of research on the African American experience during Sherman’s march renders Georgia’s enslaved people mute onlookers to this shifting balance of state power.<sup>14</sup> Years of enslavement, however, imbued the enslaved with an acute understanding of power and the ways in which it could be used to meet political ends. Not only did slaves live under the constant threat of violence, they knew that they had no legal standing, much less protection, a part from their masters.<sup>15</sup> From their purview, the

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<sup>13</sup> James Mcpherson, “Blitzkrieg in Georgia,” *New York Review of Books*, November 30, 2000, 37.

<sup>14</sup> Only two article length studies of the Black experience during Sherman’s march exist. See Paul D. Escott, “The Context of Freedom: Georgia’s Slaves During the Civil War,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (1974): 79–104.; Edmund L. Drago, “How Sherman’s March Through Georgia Affected The Slaves,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (1973): 361–75. Joseph Glatthaar devotes a brief chapter to the topic in *March to the Sea and Beyond*. See Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman’s Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns* (LSU Press, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 123.

master functioned as the State in human form; the plantation represented a realm of sovereignty where he alone wielded legitimate power.

Armed with this insight, the enslaved understood the seismic sea change of territorial sovereignty taking place during the War. As Sherman's men embarked on their march of reclamation, the slaves watched and waited, knowing that the army's success would depose the plantation regime. The Army of the Tennessee, not their masters, would claim monopoly on violence, making Sherman and his men the legitimate governing authority in the region. Yet even the least prescient of slaves quickly observed that the soldiers—those who exercised this monopoly—possessed a dual quality: they could simultaneously be liberators and thieves, friends and foes, wellsprings of freedom and sources of suffering. Each refugee, therefore, had to appraise his or her situation and decide how to proceed in a way that maximized one's individual liberty as well as one's chances of survival.<sup>16</sup>

A refugee's "statelessness" was thus both a legal descriptor as well as an emotive experience. Because so much of their future was in thrall to the army, itself a conglomeration of armed white men, a real sense of fear, uncertainty, and apprehension underpinned the euphoria of freedom. To be sure, refugees fled to the army in impressive numbers, but taking these acts of escape at face value minimizes the total refugee experience. Caught between two opposing state forces, without a legal identity of their own, and tasked with defining the contours of an ill-defined freedom, Georgia's refugees

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<sup>16</sup> Escott, "The Context of Freedom," 81.

inherited a set of circumstances that became more volatile and more dangerous by the day.

Despite these circumstances, the refugees conceptualized the march in way that expressed their optimism. Whereas the soldiers viewed their excursion as a Napoleonic crusade of conquest, the enslaved framed their situation by stepping into the Old Testament tradition. The soldiers' arrival signaled not just that the enslaved were to be free, but that the fateful day of "jubilee" had finally arrived. To modern readers, the word "jubilee" is synonymous with celebration, which makes it convenient to write off the slaves' penchant for evoking the term as a mere rhetorical device. Considering it a rhetorical device, however, only obfuscates its broader significance. The term "jubilee" is a clear reference to Leviticus 25. In Leviticus 25, God tells the Israelites that, after a period of forty-nine years, there is to be a day of atonement across the land, marking the beginning of a year-long jubilee.<sup>17</sup> On this day, slaves are to be set free, debt is to be absolved, large landholdings are to be dismantled, and property is to be returned to its original owners. In his analysis of how eighteenth and nineteenth century English radicals employed the term, Michael Chase suggests that, despite its contested usage, the Levitical jubilee was interpreted as a "time of social renewal upon principals of justice, communal

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<sup>17</sup> There is a debate as to when the year of the jubilee actually occurs. John S. Bergsma suggest that the majority opinion is that it occurs during the fiftieth year after a forty-nine year cycle. Others argue that jubilee occurs on the forty-ninth year and that the fiftieth year marks the first year in the next cycle. See John S. Bergsma, "Once Again, the Jubilee, Every 49 or 50 Years?," *Vetus Testamentum* 55, no. 1 (2005): 121–25.



ownership, liberty and the rights of labour.” It was designed, he points out, to ensure the “equitable maintenance of a republic of pastoral farmers.”<sup>18</sup>

Georgia’s enslaved men and women shared this interpretation. When Georgia’s refugees hailed Sherman and his men as their deliverers, they did so not only knowing that God had ordained the army’s arrival, but that the entire social order of the American south was on the precipice of a drastic reorganization. While their freedom may have yet been undefined, the Levitical law of Jubilee gave the refugees hope for a new life outside of slavery. Evoking the term was thus not an utterance born out of momentary catharsis, but an expression that embodied the promise that they, too, could be integral components in a rebirth of American republicanism. What Lincoln called a “new birth of freedom,” the refugees referred to as their day of jubilee.

What is so striking about the refugee’s evocation of “jubilee” is that it almost came true. As the march evolved into one of freedom, the precepts of the Levitical jubilee gradually materialized. Nowhere was this materialization more evident than when the Army occupied Savannah. By the time Sherman and his men conquered the city, roughly 17,000 refugees had abandoned their homes and followed his men to the coast. As Sherman saw it, something had to be done. Such a large number of refugees trailing his men would only encumber the army as it pushed into South Carolina. On January 16, 1865, he issued an order designed to resolve the issue. According to his now famous Field Order 15, confiscated Confederate lands stretching thirty miles inland from

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<sup>18</sup> Malcolm Chase, “From Millennium to Anniversary: The Concept of Jubilee in Late Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England,” *Past & Present*, no. 129 (1990): 133.

Charleston, South Carolina to the St. Johns River in Florida would be redistributed to freed black families in forty acre plots. Settlement would be overseen by military officials, who would provide the refugees with possessory claims to the land and the capital needed to work it. Sherman's Field Order also mandated that no white person, except military officials, could reside on the lands, giving the freed African Americans full authority over their own affairs. The Jubilee year seemed to be at hand. A vast realignment of Southern society was well underway, fulfilling the cherished promises embedded within the Levitical Jubilee.

Such a realignment, however, would be short-lived. Following President Lincoln's death and Andrew Johnson's subsequent ascension to the presidency in April of 1865, Johnson began pardoning ex-Confederates and restoring their confiscated lands. Properties bought by freed people at public auctions were safe, but the land granted to freed families in Sherman's field order were subject to reclamation once the appropriate tax had been paid and the title holder received an official pardon. Both General Rufus Saxton, the officer charged with overseeing resettlement, and General Oliver. O. Howard, the head of the Freedman's Bureau, fought to keep African American families on their new land, but in the end, Johnson and the powers of national reconciliation prevailed. Former Confederates reclaimed their lands, leaving the freed men and women no choice but to pick up and start anew.

All told, some 17,000 refugees abandoned their homes and followed Sherman's army to Savannah. An even greater number ran to the army but decided to stay at their plantations rather than march on to the coast. Together, these men and women, each of

whom had a different refugee experience, transformed the march into one for their own freedom through their experience as a refuged people. In doing so, they found themselves in a dangerous position between not just slavery and freedom but two warring states. Indeed, Georgia's formerly enslaved men and women sought freedom for themselves, but they did not act alone. Sherman's army may have been deprivers of life, disinterested champions of liberty, and lackluster defenders of property, but their affect on the refugees was undeniable. In terms of realizing freedom, the two formed an interdependent relationship. The army, a mobile vessel of state sovereignty, ingrained legitimacy into the work of emancipation, while the refugees made it a reality by taking flight. These two twin engines of emancipation joined in unison along the march, becoming the mechanism by which Georgia would be reconstructed. "Somewhere Toward Freedom: Sherman's March and Georgia's Refugee Slaves" explores the refugee experience within this complicated and, at times, violent context.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Jubilee

“One day I never shall forget,” an unnamed ex-slave told the *Minnesota Daily Gazette*, was the day “news came to our plantation that General Sherman’s army was at Atlanta, twelve or fifteen miles away.” Though the man claimed not to have any special knowledge of the war, he and his fellow enslaved people knew that they were “the cause of the misunderstanding.” “You can clearly understand,” he explained to his interviewer, “that we watched the progress of the war with the deepest concern, for we understood, in a vague way, that our friends at the North were doing battle for us, or, at least, were on our side—and all our sympathies were with them.” In October of 1864, the man came face to face with those fighting on his behalf. “Perhaps a thousand” federal soldiers “came trooping up” to his plantation and, in the absence of his owners, he and the “entire crowd” exposed all the hidden property before marching off with the army, “happier,” he claimed, “than we had ever been before in our lives.”<sup>19</sup>

As Sherman’s army left Atlanta and penetrated deep into the Georgia plantation belt, the man’s elation would soon be felt by countless more enslaved men and women. Their lives, so long a debilitating existence of unrequited sweat and violence, would be utterly transformed as they exited bondage. What awaited these men and women, though, was not freedom in the fullest sense of the word, but refugeedom, a predicament characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and, above all, risk. In confronting these

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<sup>19</sup> George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Supplement, Series 1, Vol 2* (Greenwood: Greenwood Press, 1979) 125-131.

circumstances, Georgia's freed people recast the march according to their own terms, thereby redefining the march as a march for their own citizenship. Making the march one of citizenship, however, required engaging with the soldiers, who, to the enslaved, represented an unknown quantity. Their interactions varied. Where some enslaved people found grace from the soldiers and pursued cooperation, others found hostility and withdrew themselves from Sherman's men. In each case, Georgia's enslaved people weighed their hope of freedom against their fear of the unknown and charted a path that ensured both their liberty and self-preservation. This chapter analyzes these hopes and fears as well as the early challenges of refugeedom by counter-imposing them against the back drop of the soldier-slave interaction. When placed in this context, emancipation is moved beyond policy and situated on the battle fields of war. Freedom, likewise, becomes not a legislative edict but a human endeavor fraught with its own set of personal interactions and impulses.

General William T. Sherman planned his famous march while occupying Atlanta. After four hot summer months of fighting, Sherman and his men defeated Confederate General John Bell Hood and his Army of Tennessee, leaving the city in Union hands. After losing Atlanta, however, Hood swung his beleaguered army north of the city to wreak havoc on Sherman's supply lines. Hood's movement North, while a serious threat to Sherman and his men if they stayed in Atlanta, left nothing or no one to Sherman's Southeast. The passageway to the state capitol, Milledgeville, and then to Savannah lay almost undefended. Rather than staying in Atlanta and sparring with Hood on ground that had already been won, Sherman petitioned Grant, explaining that he wanted to make a

brutal and crushing march through the state. “I can make the march,” he told Grant, “and make Georgia howl.”<sup>20</sup>

As he explained to Henry Halleck, he planned to sweep through the state in a show of force that would “illustrate the vulnerability of the South.”<sup>21</sup> “When the rich planters of the Oconee or Savannah see their fences and corn and hogs and sheep vanish before their eyes,” he proclaimed, “they will have something more than a mean opinion of the ‘Yanks.’”<sup>22</sup> Yet Grant remained skeptical. If Sherman left Atlanta, Hood would not only be free to retake the city, he would have no one to parry with, which gave him free reign to move across the region as he pleased. Marching on Savannah also meant relinquishing the vital supply lines flowing into Atlanta. Sherman and his men would have to move across the state foraging on whatever they could find. It was a risk Grant was not sure worth taking. On October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1864, more than five months after the initial trek through Georgia began, Grant finally relented. Sherman was free to make his next move through Georgia “smashing things to the sea.”<sup>23</sup>

On November 8, 1864, Sherman informed his men that they would soon embark on a march designed to have the “material effect in producing what we all so desire, his

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<sup>20</sup> Letter from Sherman to Grant, Oct. 9, 1864 in William Tecumseh Sherman, Brooks D. Simpson, and Jean Vance Berlin, *Sherman's Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 731.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Sherman to Henry Halleck, Oct. 19, 1864 in Sherman, Simpson, and Berlin, *Sherman's Civil War*, 736.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Sherman to Grant, October 11, 1864 in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*; Series 1 - Volume 38, pt. 2, 28.

[the Confederacy's] complete overthrow."<sup>24</sup> He divided his army in two, assigning Generals Oliver O. Howard and Henry Slocum command of the right and left wings respectively, and instructed his men that they were to "forage liberally" on all that Georgia had to offer.<sup>25</sup> From his previous experience in the west, in Mississippi and Western Tennessee, Sherman knew that the march would affect the enslaved, but he fashioned what would be a vague and otherwise malleable policy for them. In his orders of November 9, he mandated that only the able bodied refugees who could "be of service to the several columns" should accompany the army as his men marched to Savannah, yet he was quick to remind his troops that "the question of supplies is a very important one, and his [each commander's] first duty is to see to those who bear arms."<sup>26</sup> What constituted whether or not a refugee could be "of service" and who exactly made those decisions went unanswered, which afforded Sherman and his men the ability to manipulate the army's refugee policy as the march progressed.

Sherman's orders are indicative of his own racial worldview as well as his wartime experience with federal emancipation policies. He, like so many of the men in his command, fought to save the Union. African Americans had no place in his conception of the war or its aftermath. "I would prefer to have this a white mans war," he

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<sup>24</sup> Sherman to his men, November 8, 1864 in William T. Sherman, ed. Mills Lane, *War Is Hell!": William T. Sherman's Personal Narrative of His March through Georgia* (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1974), 144.

<sup>25</sup> Sherman to his men, November 9, 1864 in William T. Sherman, ed. Mills Lane, *War is Hell!": William T. Sherman's Personal Narrative of His March Through Georgia* (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1974), 145.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

wrote his wife in 1863. “With my opinions of negroes [sic], and my experience, ye a prejudice,” he went on, “I cannot trust them yet.”<sup>27</sup> Good soldier that he was, however, he followed orders—at least so it seemed on the surface. While stationed in Memphis he enforced the Confiscation Act of 1862 but exhibited a narrow interpretation of its dictates. He offered “no provisions for any save laboring men” and refused to grant letters of manumission.<sup>28</sup> In one instance, he personally assured Confederate General G. J. Pillow that only recognized courts could fully emancipate slaves.<sup>29</sup> When it came to arming black soldiers, he drew an even harder line. Despite protestations from Grant, Halleck, and his Commander and Chief, he resisted black enlistment efforts. In the days following July 30, 1864, his rationale for resistance became public knowledge as what he later called his “negro letter” reached the northern press. Writing to John Spooner, he remonstrated that the freed people are in a “transition state” and are “not the equal to the white man.” “I and the armies I have commanded have conducted to safe points more negroes than those of any other general officer in the army,” he argued, “but I prefer some negroes as pioneers, teamsters, cooks, and servants, others gradually to experiment in the art of the soldier.”<sup>30</sup> The letter, though conciliatory to a point, precipitated an

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<sup>27</sup> Sherman to Ellen Ewing Sherman, April 17, 1863 in Sherman, Simpson, and Berlin, *Sherman's Civil War*, 454.

<sup>28</sup> Sherman to Maj. J. A. Rawlins, August 14, 1862 in *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>29</sup> Sherman to Pillow, August 14, 1862 in *Ibid.*, 274-275.

<sup>30</sup> Sherman to John Spooner, July 30, 1864 in Sherman, Simpson, and Berlin, *Sherman's Civil War*, 677–78.



immediate public outcry. Claims that Sherman treated African Americans unfairly—claims that originated in Memphis—grew louder than ever before, and they would become louder still.

Sherman's refugee policy during the march through Georgia thus served a dual purpose. On one hand, it met a military need as it infused refugee labor into the army and gave his men a written directive whereby they could reject unwanted refugees. Yet, on the other hand, it was a policy born out of political expediency. Crafting a policy that accepted *some* refugees but still gave the army the power to reject others would placate Sherman's detractors and repair his public image. "For the most part generals and officers encouraged the slaves to join the army," David P. Conyngham cogently put it, "simply because they knew it would sound so well at home."<sup>31</sup> Conyngham's astute observation embodies a stunning development that Sherman was reluctant to accept. By 1864 the war had evolved into something much more than a contest between two combative armies. It had also become a war to end slavery, and Sherman knew that even if he did not "care a straw for niggers," he now had to at least feign interest in not just being conqueror but a liberator as well.<sup>32</sup>

Prior to encountering Sherman's men, Georgia's enslaved people faced a number of obstacles to freedom. One of the most significant was the phenomena of white

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<sup>31</sup> Conyngham, *Sherman's March Through the South*, 276.

<sup>32</sup> Sherman to Daniel Martin, August 10, 1864 in Sherman, Simpson, and Berlin, *Sherman's Civil War*, 688.; Michael Fellman, *Citizen Sherman: A Life of William Tecumseh Sherman*, Modern War Studies (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 149–70.

refugeeing. Weary southerners living in what was believed to be dangerous locations—places on the coast or along strategic arteries of war—often sought refuge in places supposedly outside the war’s reach. Other families sought refuge simply to remove their slaves to places where the temptation to flee to Federal lines might not be as great. In Georgia, this often meant migrating to the state’s interior. Families living along the coast, where the Union navy had been a permanent threat since the beginning of the war, fled inland, and by spring of 1864, as the Army of the Tennessee fought its way south toward Atlanta, North Georgians fled south to the lower piedmont. The upshot was that by the time Sherman commenced his march, the state had contracted. Georgia’s wealthy families and, by default, much of the state’s enslaved population saturated the plantation belt and its connected environs, the very stretch of the state that would soon bear Sherman’s wrath.<sup>33</sup>

For enslaved people, white refugeeing only made the already difficult prospect of escaping slavery that much more difficult. Not only did it move enslaved people farther away from the supposed safety of Union lines, but because white refugees frequently traveled with only their most valuable slaves in tow, the refugee flights of white men and women often separated African American families. This forced migration, which white Southerners crassly called “running the negroes,” wrenched enslaved people out of familiar kinship networks and thrust them into new social communities.<sup>34</sup> Unlike on their

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<sup>33</sup> Clarence L. Mohr, *On the Threshold of Freedom: Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 103–4.

<sup>34</sup> Bell Irvin Wiley, *Southern Negroes, 1861-1865*, 2d ed., Yale Historical Publications. Miscellany, 31 (New York: Rinehart, 1953), 5.

home plantations, they could no longer rely on the assistance or information from slaves on nearby estates. Beyond their new plantations of refuge lay unknown environments full of unfamiliar places and foreign faces—a daunting hurdle for anyone trying to make a break for freedom. Of course, not every enslaved person faced these challenges. Most, in fact, did not. Yet white refugeeing exemplifies the turbulence of the situation facing enslaved people. Prior to becoming refugees themselves, African Americans had to first confront the inherent challenges of maneuvering a landscape upturned by war.

Enslaved people also had to maneuver a minefield of misinformation. As the war raged on, both masters and slaves fought to receive, disseminate, and manipulate word of war's comings and goings. While Southern whites neither controlled where the army would march nor their slaves' own desire for freedom, most masters regulated what their slaves knew about the war—or so they believed. The underlying presumption was that the more the slaves knew, the more dangerous they became. On a plantation outside of Covington, Major George Ward Nichols questioned a female slave as to whether she had heard of the Emancipation Proclamation. "No, sar, I nebber heard sich a ting. De white folks nebber talk 'fore black men; dey mighty free from that," she replied.<sup>35</sup> Some slave owners even went so far as to circulate lies about the brutality of Sherman and his men. Their hope was that fear could generate loyalty. At Confederate general Howell Cobb's plantation just outside of Milledgeville, Nichols reported that the refugees were told that

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<sup>35</sup> George Ward Nichols, *The Story of the Great March. From the Diary of a Staff Officer* (New York: Harper & Brothers, [c1865]), 60.

Sherman and his men “threw the women and children into the Chattahoochee” and that when “the buildings were burned in Atlanta, we [the union army] filled them with negroes to be roasted and devoured by the flames.”<sup>36</sup>

What Southern whites failed to realize was that the rumor war was not a one sided affair. Enslaved people scrutinized their masters closely and devised methods designed to combat the flow of deluding information. While some Southern whites like Eliza Francis Andrews recognized that each slave doubled as a “possible spy,” most were unaware of just how perceptive the enslaved people actually were.<sup>37</sup> In his diary, the US army’s Chief Telegraph Officer, John Van Duser, reported that a group of freed men and women from Conyers had heard the same story about the army locking the slaves inside the burning buildings in Atlanta, but he concluded that “There is not one of them believe [*sic*] stories.”<sup>38</sup> The rationale was simple. As one refugee reasoned, “Massa hates de Yankees, and he’s no fren’ ter we; so we am de Yankees bi’s fren’s.”<sup>39</sup> Many refugees were also much more knowledgeable about the details of the war than their masters could have ever imagined. Henry Hitchcock met a “very smart negro woman” who explained that she knew about “Burnside, McClellan, and Sherman, also the fall of Atlanta, and

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 58–59.

<sup>37</sup> Eliza Frances Andrews, *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl, 1864-1865* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1908), 385.

<sup>38</sup> Charles J. Brockman, “THE JOHN VAN DUSER DIARY OF SHERMAN’S MARCH FROM ATLANTA TO HILTON HEAD,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1969): 222.

<sup>39</sup> Nichols, *The Story of the Great March. From the Diary of a Staff Officer*, 59.

even the recent unsuccessful rebel attack there.”<sup>40</sup> He also encountered a group of refugees on a plantation near Millen, Georgia, whose spokesman, he claimed, “was perfectly aware of Lincoln’s proclamation.” When asked if he knew that the Confederate government was debating whether or not they should arm the slaves, the man responded, “Yes, Sir, we knows dat.” Asked if he would fight against the Union army, the man bluntly replied, “No, *Sir*—de day dey gives us arms, *dat day de war ends!*”<sup>41</sup>

When Sherman’s army pushed out of Atlanta, it did not take long for their presence to reverberate through the slave communities and propel those enslaved men and women considering desertion into taking flight. When reflecting on the first few stops at Lithonia, Conyers, and Covington, one soldier remembered, “Every roadside on the march down into Georgia was sprinkled and sometimes black with exulting negroes, who swarmed in from every cabin and plantation for miles around.”<sup>42</sup> Another claimed that before reaching Milledgeville, “a great caravan of negroes” followed his column as it marched.<sup>43</sup> On just the third day out, Henry Hitchcock reported that a group of “four or five stout negro men” appeared inside their lines. When asked why he still fled to the army after being told of the rumors about what Sherman’s men did to enslaved people in

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<sup>40</sup> Hitchcock *Marching with Sherman*, 81.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 127–28.

<sup>42</sup> Adin B. Underwood, *The Three Years’ Service of the Thirty-Third Mass. Infantry Regiment 1862-1865* (Boston: A. Williams & co., 1881), 242–43.

<sup>43</sup> J. R. (John R. ) Kinnear, *History of the Eighty-Sixth Regiment, Illinois Volunteer Infantry* (Chicago: Tribune company’s book and job printing office, 1866), 80.

Atlanta, one of the men, whom Hitchcock claimed represented the “leading spirit of the group,” explained why he and his fellow refugees felt compelled to act. “I was bound to come, Sah—good trade or bad trade, I was bound to risk it,” the man claimed.<sup>44</sup> As the Army marched through Georgia’s plantation belt toward the coast, sundry more enslaved men and women would come to the same conclusion. Though circumstances differed from person to person, the situation was clear. It was either “freedom now,” a soldier explained, “or never.”<sup>45</sup>

It also did not take long for the soldiers to recognize the “profound religious sentiment” with which the refugees hailed their arrival.<sup>46</sup> According to one soldier, the enslaved greeted the men as if “the day of the Lord had come.” He remembered them shouting, “ ‘Glory be to de Lord!’” and “God Bress ye Yanks; Massa Linkum done ‘member us.’ ”<sup>47</sup> To be sure, Lincoln and the soldiers received their share of praise, but their adoration was nothing compared to General Sherman’s constant deification. Wherever he went, the refugees exalted his every move. In his memoirs, he wrote that “whenever they [the refugees] heard my name,” they “shouted and prayed in their peculiar style,” which, he noted, “had the eloquence to move a stone.”<sup>48</sup> John Richards

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<sup>44</sup> Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 70.

<sup>45</sup> Kinnear, *History of the Eighty-Sixth Regiment, Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 80–81.

<sup>46</sup> Drago, “How Sherman’s March Through Georgia Affected The Slaves,” 365.

<sup>47</sup> Underwood, *The Three Years’ Service of the Thirty-Third Mass. Infantry Regiment 1862-1865*, 241.

<sup>48</sup> William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman: By Himself*, Civil War Centennial Series (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), 80.

Boyle, a member of the 111<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania remembered “one old patriarch” who after gazing at the general, declared “I have seen the Great Messiah and the Army of the Lord.”<sup>49</sup> Other slaves attributed the army’s arrival to years of steadfast prayer. “De Lor’ bless ye, boys!,” one enslaved man exclaimed, “I knowed it’d come; I’s looked for it dis fifteen year, and I pray de Lor’ I might live to see this day.”<sup>50</sup>

This religious conviction cannot be understated. While some refugees interpreted the army’s arrival as an answered prayer or an eschatological sign of Christ’s return, most made sense of the situation by turning to the Old Testament. Rather than evoking the exodus story, however, the refugees turned to the language of the Levitical jubilee—an obscure dictum in Judaic law. In Leviticus 25, God commands the Israelites to observe a day of atonement every forty-nine years.<sup>51</sup> Men are to free their slaves, restore property to its original owners, divide estates, and exempt all debts. For the next calendar year, the Kingdom of Israel was to undergo nothing less than a vast social realignment designed to restore equity amongst its people. Thus when a refugee claimed that the long awaited “day of jubilee” had finally arrived or that “De day hab come,” as one slave put it, he or she did so as an expression of this same vision.<sup>52</sup> That the jubilee year ordained

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<sup>49</sup> Boyle, *Soldiers True*, 262.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Edward Benton, *As Seen from the Ranks: A Boy in the Civil War* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s sons, 1902), 219.

<sup>51</sup> There is a debate as to when the year of the jubilee actually occurs. John S. Bergsma suggest that the majority opinion is that it occurs during the fiftieth year after a forty-nine year cycle. Others argue that jubilee occurs on the forty-ninth year and that the fiftieth year marks the first year in the next cycle. See John S. Bergsma, “Once Again, the Jubilee, Every 49 or 50 Years?,” *Vetus Testamentum* 55, no. 1 (2005): 121–25.

<sup>52</sup> Benton, *As Seen from the Ranks*, 217.; Nichols, *The Story of the Great March*, 56.

immediate freedom mattered, but the refugees' comprehension of the Levitical law ran deeper than that. Indeed, the refugees embraced the language of jubilee because it presaged their expectations of freedom. Like the society God envisioned for the Israelites, Georgia's refugee slaves envisioned a free America rebuilt upon a renewed commitment to republican ideals. The Levitical jubilee not only embodied these ideals but promised a new beginning. As the refugee's understood it, America's second founding was at hand.<sup>53</sup>

Not every refugee rushed off to meet the army. For some refugees, their encounters with the soldiers came as Sherman's men swarmed their plantations. With no stable supply lines to sustain them, the soldiers formed small raiding parties and foraged off the landscape and whatever plantation they could find. The goal was two-fold: self-sustenance and coercive intimidation. The men were to extract submission out of the white southerners by penetrating their psyches by way of their smokehouses. Very little was safe. Sherman's material war spared only life itself as his men confiscated food stuffs, burned cotton warehouses, and, in some cases, walked off with arms full of family treasures. The level of destruction, however, varied from one plantation to the next. If a white family remained compliant or claimed to have been pre-war Unionists, some officers would keep excessive foraging to a minimum. What was deemed excessive foraging or appropriate behavior, though, almost always depended on how far the officer in charge was willing to go.

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<sup>53</sup> Malcolm Chase, "From Millennium to Anniversary: The Concept of Jubilee in Late Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England," *Past & Present*, no. 129 (1990): 132–47.



Enslaved people thus inhabited a treacherous position. Caught between the watchful eye of their masters and the whims of armed Federal troops, the wrong move, however calculated, could bear mortal consequences. Reactions, therefore, varied across each plantation and individual slaves. Some, like Lewis Ogletree, an enslaved man from Griffin, Georgia, and Alec Bostwick, who mistook the soldiers for “patterollers,” hid themselves in the woods.<sup>54</sup> Others, like Susan Matthews were not quite as weary. “We wanted them to come,” she explained, “We knowed ‘twould be fun to see ‘em.”<sup>55</sup> Enslaved people like Matthews may have been eager to have the soldiers descend upon their plantations, but their enthusiasm does not diminish the gravity nor the difficulty of the situation. One still had to discern the soldiers’ intentions and chart a course that ensured one’s survival, much less freedom. As historian Paul Escott maintains, charting this course often meant exercising “caution” rather than “precipitous action.”<sup>56</sup>

The refugees’ skepticism of the soldiers was not unfounded. The rumor war raged on right up until the first soldier-slave interactions. Ellen Carter, an enslaved person from Woodland, Georgia, remembered being stunned by the soldier’s “guns glittering in the sun.” When she commented on their beauty, her mistress pinched her and chided, “Hush!

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<sup>54</sup> WPA Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Lewis Ogletree, Vol. IV, Part III, 146-149.; WPA Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Alec Bostwick, Vol. IV, Part I, 106-112. “Patterollers” were patrollers, armed bands of white men who roamed the countryside looking for runaway slaves.

<sup>55</sup> WPA Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Susan Matthews, Vol. IV, Part III, 116-118.

<sup>56</sup> Escott, “The Context of Freedom: Georgia’s Slaves During the Civil War,” 91.

don't you know they'll kill you."<sup>57</sup> The soldiers, themselves, did little to inspire confidence. Amidst the pandemonium of confiscating chickens, upturning chests of drawers, and sullyng family heirlooms, enslaved people often found themselves caught in the crossfire. Unable to expel a soldier from ransacking her bedroom, Mrs. Louise Banks sent Sarah, "the negro cook," upstairs to confront the man. Moments later Sarah returned screaming with whip marks laid upon her face, shoulders, and arms.<sup>58</sup>

Enslaved women, in particular, had to be on guard. The soldiers, whether donned in blue or not, were still white men with little respect for black bodies. Sexual predation remained an almost constant threat. "Every night they [the soldiers] are after the young girls," wrote Sue Smythe, a white South Carolinian who experienced Sherman's march near Columbia, South Carolina, "and they [the slave girls] are obliged to take to the woods, to save themselves from ravishing."<sup>59</sup> Indeed, fear of rape was real—so real that on one plantation the men rounded up all the women in one cabin and placed a guard by the door. As one of the women explained, "You know de didn't want to put no temptation in de way o' dem soldiers."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ellen Carter, *In Her Words-Reminiscences of Old Aunt Ellen Carter*, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Microfilm Collection, Drawer 283, Box 20, 5.

<sup>58</sup> Louise Banks McGinty Evans, "Reminiscences of Louise Banks McGinty Evans," *Confederate Letters, Diaries, and Reminiscences, 1861-1865*, Georgia Department of Archives and History Bound Typescript Collection, Vol. 13, 229-230.

<sup>59</sup> Sue Smythe to Jane Anne Smythe, 14 April 1865, 12 MSS, Box 1, Papers of the Adger, Smyth[e], Flynn families, 1823-1930, South Caroliniana Library.

<sup>60</sup> WPA Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Rachel Sullivan, Vol. IV, Part IV, 226-229.

Impressment became another disturbing feature of the soldier-slave interaction. Sherman's refugee policy indicates that he viewed the march as a means of filling his ranks with much needed cooks, personal valets, and so called "pioneers," a glorified term for military laborers. The line delineating those refugees who joined the army on their own volition and those impressed into service, however, was often very thin. Enslaved people would be "taken off" or "carried off" by the Union army, sometimes not knowing if the army intended to free them or keep them enslaved. For some, this forced displacement severed familial ties and altered the course of an enslaved person's life. Amanda Styles, a young enslaved girl at the time of the march, remembered seeing her mother being "carried off" by the soldiers. This ghastly image would be the last she would ever have of her mother as Styles claimed that "she [her mother] was never heard of again."<sup>61</sup> William Ward, an enslaved man who encountered Sherman's men in Atlanta, was taken to Virginia, where he carried "powder and shot" for the Army of the Potomac. When the war reached its end, Ward was then transported—it is not known by whom or for what cause—to Mississippi where he lived as a slave in the peonage system for almost forty years.<sup>62</sup>

Dolly Sumner Lunt, a Maine native and widow of a well-to-do slave owner from Covington, Georgia, describes a particularly appalling sight. After ransacking her pantry and hunting down her chickens, turkeys, and pigs, which some of the men killed for

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<sup>61</sup> WPA Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Amanda Styles, Vol. IV, Part III, 115-118.

<sup>62</sup> WPA Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, William Ward, Vol. IV, Part IV, 130-131.

sport, the soldiers then turned to her male slaves, forcing them from the plantation “at the point of a bayonet.” One boy, who Lunt claimed was lame, tried to escape the ruckus by climbing under a set of floorboards, but his effort was to no avail. The men “pulled him out, picked him up, and drove him off.” Another, an enslaved man named Jack, approached Mrs. Lunt with “big tears coursing down his cheeks” and informed her that he was to be taken with the army. She entreated him to hide in her room, but before she could hide him, a man “followed in, cursing him and threatening to shoot him if he did not go.” The soldiers even went so far as to invade the slave quarters. Every cabin, Lunt claimed, was “rifled of every valuable,” for the soldiers did not believe that the enslaved people could have owned such things for themselves. An enslaved man named Frank, who Lunt described as a “money-making and saving boy,” had his “chests broke open, his money and tobacco taken” and all of his and his wife’s clothes stolen. Realizing that his men could not be restrained, a soldier Lunt described as a guard saved the enslaved people from more damage by allowing their valuables to be taken into the house, which had, by that time, already been picked through and turned over to a temporary armed patrol.<sup>63</sup>

Lunt’s diary, however, is as revealing for its methodological lessons as much as it is for its content. Most materials relating to the march come from white sources. The WPA slave narratives are the exceptions, yet even then, the slave narratives, like the white sources, are inherently one-sided. That one was “taken off” or “carried off,” to use

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<sup>63</sup> Dolly Sumner Lunt and Julian Street, *A Woman’s Wartime Journal; an Account of the Passage over a Georgia Plantation of Sherman’s Army on the March to the Sea, as Recorded in the Diary of Dolly Sumner Lunt (Mrs. Thomas Burge)*; (New York, The Century Co., 1918), 24–27.

the phraseology of impressment, is a matter of one's own point of view. Being "taken off" or "running away with" can thus be one and the same or entirely disparate actions depending on the viewer. Consider an incident described in Lunt's diary. According to her, the last she saw of Mid, an enslaved man whom she described as "her shepherd," "a man had him going around the garden," presumably forcing him to find Lunt's sheep. What Lunt perceived as coercion, though, could have just as easily doubled as resistance, for Mid could have directed the man to the sheep on his own accord. The same conclusion can be drawn from what she wrote about Henry, whom she asserted "was taken... probably when he and Bob went for the the mules." Her unshakable faith in her slaves inhibited her from considering that Henry might have slipped off once the opportunity struck. These examples, while inconclusive, are important because black resistance permeated the march only to be concealed by the language of white actors like Lunt and, at times, the second hand retellings of the slave narratives.

Henry's and Midi's actions appear as resistance when placed in the proper context. Just as refugeedom inevitably thrust the freedmen and women into statelessness, emancipation inserted the refugees into the cauldron of war. While their freedom may have still been ill-defined, they nevertheless now possessed the freedom to aid the Union army and help produce their desired outcome of the war. Indeed, refugeedom transformed the freed men and women into military *agents*. As slaves, they had always been political *actors* in that they could advance their wartime aims through indirect means, but as refugees they now had the ability to take direct and immediate military action.

The most immediate means of exerting this new power was by partnering with the soldiers in their material war. Knowing that their goods were in danger, white families often tried to conceal whatever possessions they had by burying or hiding their belongings in undisclosed locations. But as an infantryman from New York recorded, “the concealment was done almost entirely by negroes, and they knew where every box was buried and every horse and mule hid.”<sup>64</sup> When given the chance, the refugees seized the opportunity to wield the one irrevocable weapon they possessed—their knowledge. As one Illinoisan boasted, “A Ninety-Second man could scent a horse from a long way off, especially if he could have a conversation with Uncle Bob in the yard, or Aunt Dinah in the kitchen.”<sup>65</sup> H.H. Tarr, a captain in the Twentieth Massachusetts, remembered questioning a white man as to whether or not he owned a horse. When his slaves heard the man reply that he did not, they informed Tarr’s inferiors that the man had lied and that they could lead a troop of soldiers to his horses if Tarr and his men would promise to take them along. Tarr assented and when the troop returned, they returned with “fifteen head of stock” and “four of the best bred racers.”<sup>66</sup> George S. Bradley, a Wisconsin chaplain, recalled an evening where “some twenty negroes got together, took 40 of their master’s mules and horses, and come over to us.” “They had been sent off into the

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<sup>64</sup> Rice C. Bull and K. Jack Bauer, *Soldiering: The Civil War Diary of Rice C. Bull, 123rd New York Volunteer Infantry*, Berkley ed (New York: Berkley Books, 1988), 181.

<sup>65</sup> 1862-1865 Illinois Infantry. 92d Regt., *Ninety-Second Illinois Volunteers* (Freeport, Ill., Journal steam publishing house and bookbindery, 1875), 181.

<sup>66</sup> Diary of H.H. Tarr in John W. Storrs, *The “Twentieth Connecticut”; a Regimental History* (Ansonia, Conn.: Press of the “Naugatuck Valley Sentinel,” 1886), 152–53.

swamps with them,” he explained, “but concluded that it would suit the Yankees pretty well to get a hold of such things.”<sup>67</sup>

In other cases, the refugees acted in direct concert with the soldiers. Outside of Covington, Georgia, John Van Duser reported that, against the pleas of a rebel proprietor, a group of refugees “piloted a squad of soldiers to the cellar” of a grog shop. When the soldiers emerged, they did so carrying “five large demijohns, one of No 1 whiskey, and the rest medeia wine.”<sup>68</sup> Others resorted to less conspicuous methods of aiding the soldiers. One particularly shrewd woman hid all of the white family’s guns in the “bed coverlet” rather than in the “big, thick plum orchard” as she had been directed. The soldiers subsequently found the guns with little trouble and then, with a laugh, “broke them over the shade trees.”<sup>69</sup>

Other refugees aided the army by offering valuable pieces of military reconnaissance. When the army sent out foraging detachments, those units broke away from the army’s main body, leaving them all alone in the Georgia countryside. Keeping track of where they were and who might be around constituted a strategic challenge, particularly if a unit was small in numbers and ventured away from other foraging parties. The refugees, however, ameliorated the issue by serving as the soldiers’ covert

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<sup>67</sup> George S. Bradley, *The Star Corps; Or, Notes of an Army Chaplain, during Sherman’s Famous “march to the Sea.”* (Milwaukee: Jermain & Brightman, printers, 1865), 188.

<sup>68</sup> Brockman, “THE JOHN VAN DUSER DIARY OF SHERMAN’S MARCH FROM ATLANTA TO HILTON HEAD,” 223.

<sup>69</sup> Nancy Ann Balcom (Mrs. Iverson Branan), *Mrs. Iverson Branan Reminiscences*, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Microfilm Collection, Drawer 283, Box 18, 22.

guardians. Early one morning three refugees entered H.H. Tarr's tent and informed him that during the night a Confederate force passed no more than a mile from where his detachment made camp. "These negroes," he explained, "had on their own hook, gone out and stood watch for our [his detachment's] additional safety." Just a day earlier he "passed through rebel lines" and back again "with the aid of negro guides."<sup>70</sup>

Captain James Royal Ladd of the 113<sup>th</sup> Ohio Volunteers shared a similar experience. On Thanksgiving, he remembered marching out to a nearby farmhouse where a group of soldiers had been captured the day before by a small group of enemy soldiers. The premises were believed to be empty, but before waltzing up to the front door, a refugee informed Ladd and his fellow soldiers that the hostile gang of Confederates may still be inside the house. Had the refugee not spoken up, the situation could have turned deadly, for as Ladd recalled, "No sooner had we come in sight than sure enough Johnny was there and commenced firing." At the end of the skirmish, seven of the enemy combatants had been either captured or forced to surrender. Ladd and his comrades escaped without as much as a scratch.<sup>71</sup>

The refugees' willingness to help the soldiers forged a lasting, albeit asymmetrical, union that did not go unnoticed. One Illinoisan spoke for the rest of his regiment and, indeed, the rest of the army when he wrote that the refugees were "always

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<sup>70</sup> Diary of H.H. Tarr in John W. Storrs, *The "Twentieth Connecticut"; a Regimental History*, 152-53.

<sup>71</sup> James Royal Ladd, "With Sherman to the Sea," *American Heritage*, December 1978, Vol. 30, No. 1, New York: American Heritage Pub., 1778, 8.



our faithful allies and friends.”<sup>72</sup> John Richards Boyle echoed these sentiments when he wrote, “Every black face was the face of a friend . . . every black man’s poor cabin was a city of refugee to a hunted or imperiled Union soldier.”<sup>73</sup> This spirit of goodwill between the two parties persisted long after Sherman’s army reached Savannah. Their joint destruction of the Confederacy’s most visible symbol of power, the plantation house, may have occurred in the context of war, but it sowed the seeds of a biracial future. Georgia’s Republican party, the party that would lead the state back into the Union, was formed not in stuffy legislative halls but on these oft-forgotten battlefields of war where Georgia’s refugees became equal partners in the the state’s early reconstruction.

As eager as some refugees were to harness their military might and help the soldiers, the scarcity of food caused others to toe a much finer line. By 1864, after four long years of war and a debilitating blockade, many families possessed insufficient food supplies, and the enslaved bore the brunt of the shortages. “Times wuz so hard, why, honey, in them times folks couldn’t get so much as salt on their victuals,” remarked Emma Hurley, a former slave from Wilkes County, Georgia.<sup>74</sup> Conditions became so grim that Hurley and other enslaved people resorted to unusual food substitutes just to get by.<sup>75</sup> The arrival of Sherman’s army thus bore both the hope of freedom and the prospect

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<sup>72</sup> Illinois Infantry. 92d Regt., *Ninety-Second Illinois Volunteers*, 181.

<sup>73</sup> Boyle, *Soldiers True*, 263.

<sup>74</sup> WPA Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Emma Hurley Vol. IV, Part II, 277.

<sup>75</sup> The substitutes mentioned most were starched okra beans for coffee beans and watermelon rinds for soda. See WPA Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Emma Hurley, 140.; WPA Slave Narratives, Georgia

of starvation. Just how ravenous the soldiers foraged through a plantation's foodstuffs often determined how much food remained for the newly freed men and women to sustain them during the winter. Annie Price, a former slave from Spalding County, Ga, revealed as much when she explained that Sherman's men did not visit her plantation directly, which meant that she and her fellow refugees had plenty of food.<sup>76</sup> Dolly Yellady, an ex-slave who experienced Sherman and his men during the Carolina campaign, affirmed Price's reasoning. "Dey give us freedom," she explained, "but dey took mos' everything an' lef' us nuthin' to eat, nuthin' to live on."<sup>77</sup> While some commanders would sometimes divide the requisitioned goods amongst the freed people, particularly if they helped the soldiers or if they claimed to have very cruel masters, it was by no means standard procedure. Preserving one's food supply often meant countervailing the soldiers.

When refugees resisted the soldiers, whether out of loyalty to their white families or in an effort to save their food supplies, the soldiers were quick to threaten physical violence. The cooperation that united the soldiers and formerly enslaved people on one plantation devolved into open hostility on the other. After being abandoned by his foraging party, the Reverend John Potter of the 101<sup>st</sup> Illinois Infantry demanded that the plantation's freed people help him load a wagon full of corn. When they balked at his

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Narratives, Bill Heard, IV, 140. See also Drago, "How Sherman's March Through Georgia Affected The Slaves," 365.

<sup>76</sup> WPA Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Annie Price, Vol. IV, Part III, 183.

<sup>77</sup> WPA Slave Narratives, North Carolina Narratives, Dolly Yellady, Part XI, 183.

demands, he then drew his revolver which sent the freed men to work. One of the men made a slight quip about having to load the corn, to which Potter responded by telling him to “work hard and keep his mouth shut or we would take him too.”<sup>78</sup> Rice K. Bull, a New York Infantry man, alluded to the use of these same tactics. In his diary he explained that when he and his men descended upon a plantation, “negroes were used, or I might say forced, to reveal the hiding places” of family heirlooms and goods.<sup>79</sup>

These strong-arm tactics epitomize the soldier-slave relationship. According to the Emancipation Proclamation, the soldiers, as representatives of the U.S. Government, were mandated to maintain “actual freedom” for the enslaved. Sherman’s own refugee policy, while denying blanket refuge, made concessions whereby refugees could join ranks if one could be of use to the army. Taken at their word, these two policies indicate that the federal government represented the interests of freed people, but the vagueness of both the Emancipation Proclamation and Sherman’s stipulations created a discrepancy between policy and actuality. On the plantation, amidst overt shows of physical force, intimidation, and destruction, war not policy reigned supreme. Thus even if the federal government designated freed people as asylum seekers, potential allies, or even quasi-citizens, the soldiers themselves delineated jurisdiction and determined appropriated action. Navigating this wide gap constituted the major challenge of refugeedom and nowhere was it as tangible as during the initial soldier-slave interactions. This delicate

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<sup>78</sup> John Potter, *Reminiscences of the Civil War in the United States*, First Edition edition (The Globe presses, 1897), 108.

<sup>79</sup> Bull and Bauer, *Soldiering*, 181.

balance of both needing the soldiers to legitimate emancipation and then charting a path to freedom in spite of them typifies the struggle of the stateless refugee slave. In confronting this struggle head on, however, Georgia's enslaved people began claiming ownership of the march's meaning and recasting it according to their own desires.

## CHAPTER TWO

### March

“At a Negro shanty, some miles distant from Milledgeville,” Georgia Pepper Whitfield, an army captain who now served as a war correspondent, witnessed an unforgettable scene. The cabin’s two residents, an elderly African American couple who Whitfield described as being “over sixty,” expressed no desire leave their home. “All at once,” however, the woman “straightened herself up,” pointed her finger at her spouse, and exclaimed: “ ‘What for you set dar?’ You spose I wait sixty years for nuthen? Dont yer see de door is open?’ ” “ ‘Yes, sar,’ ” she concluded, “ ‘I walks till I drap in my tracks.’ ” The experience shook Whitfield. Taken aback by the woman’s “fierce, almost fiendish” countenance and the vigor with which she spoke, he decided that only Rembrandt “could have painted the scene with its dramatic surroundings.”<sup>80</sup>

Of the many decisions made during a refugee’s journey, none was as consequential as the decision to abandon one’s home and follow Sherman’s army to the coast. The initial decision to quit one’s master was no less important, but exchanges like the one Whitfield witnessed often determined the course of a refugee’s experience and, indeed, their future as a freed man or woman. The decision to leave also served an extension of emancipation. Sherman’s army—the body whose “monopoly of violence” legitimized emancipation in the first place—was on the move. Staying behind meant remaining in an environment where vengeful southern whites could attempt to reclaim

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<sup>80</sup> George Whitfield Pepper, *Personal Recollections of Sherman’s Campaigns in Georgia and the Carolinas*. (Zanesville, O.: H. Dunne, 1866), 276–77.

their sovereignty through force. Maintaining freedom was thus predicated on remaining within the army's ever changing zones of physical jurisdiction. The refugees realized as much and claimed citizenship with their feet. They left homes, friends, even families to march with the army as it moved toward the coast. How the refugees claimed citizenship with their feet while simultaneously contending with an army in motion is the central theme of this chapter.

The refugees exhibited an acute understanding that freedom was relational. They believed that the Emancipation Proclamation gave the army a mandate to recognize and maintain black freedom wherever it decided to march. Therein, however, lies the rub. The army was in a constant state of motion. Sherman's blitzkrieg-like pace through the state inhibited not only him but the War Department writ large from establishing occupational forces in any of the cities they marched through. Their advance out of a city thus produced a vacuum of power. Sherman's march extended federal sovereignty over much of Georgia, but devoid of proper enforcement mechanisms, how could such claims to sovereignty be implemented as a matter of fact? Free from punishment or rebuke, white Southerners could step into this void and operate as they always had, almost as if no transferal of state power occurred at all. As one soldier explained, the refugees understood that "to return or be captured, meant death!" Freedom went only so far as the army's ability to guarantee it.<sup>81</sup>

This phenomenon made black freedom as tenuous as ever. Not only was their freedom ill-defined, but how to enforce the promises of freedom became a serious

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<sup>81</sup> Kinnear, *History of the Eighty-Sixth Regiment, Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 259.

problem—one ameliorated only by joining ranks. Indeed, if Sherman’s army could not properly enforce claims to freedom due to its constant motion, the refugees took matters into their own hands and safeguarded their newly-claimed status as freed people by marching. When a refugee could not find work within the column as either a cook, valet, pioneer, or maid, he or she simply marched along at the army’s rear. Proximity, after all, was what mattered. So long as the refugees remained in a zone in which the army exercised absolute authority, they believed their freedom to be guaranteed. Refuge, therefore, proved to be an elastic construct. While Sherman may have denied blanket sanctuary, he could not keep the refugees from seeking it nor conceptualizing notions of refuge to fit their own circumstances. Whereas Sherman thought of refuge as asylum within the corporeal confines of the army, the refugees fashioned a broad meaning of refuge congruent with their acute understanding of state power. To the freed people, refuge was neither a condition nor state of being. It was a fluid relationship with the body from which their safety and security—their freedom—derived.

By fashioning this broad definition of refuge, Georgia’s refugees staked a claim to citizenship. Like freedom, however, citizenship itself was an abstract concept with multiple layers of meaning. As historian Chandra Manning points out, the prism of voting rights has designated access to the ballot box a contemporary “badge of equal citizenship,” but to equate citizenship with voting is to ignore citizenship’s most fundamental provisions and undercut its elasticity.<sup>82</sup> Just as the refugees formulated a

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<sup>82</sup> Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2016), 14.

unique conception of “refuge,” Georgia’s refugees fashioned a meaning of citizenship that fit their extraordinary circumstances. Citizenship, to them, was not so much a bundle of rights as much as it was a relationship to the army whereby they could claim access to the federal government’s authority. Access to this authority granted refuge and secured their freedom, but it also diminished the ambiguity of their statelessness. It confirmed the freed people’s sense of belonging to a national body politic, even if the federal government had not yet determined what their relationship to the state would be. The refugees’ continuous desire to expand their access to the army and solidify this sense of belonging would be the ongoing struggle of the march.<sup>83</sup>

To the refugees, the march constituted a real migration. Freed people uprooted themselves, their families, and their movable possessions to march at the rear of the army. It was perceived as a means to an end, a journey to a place where freedom could be realized in full. While some suspected Savannah would be their ultimate city of refuge, most were prepared to maintain their relational understanding of refuge for as long as they needed to. Illinoisan James Connolly explained as much when he claimed that the refugees were “apparently satisfied” that the army was taking them “somewhere toward freedom,” even if, he chided, “a majority of them, don’t know what freedom is.” When asked where they were going, he claimed their “almost invariable reply” was: “Don’t

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. I borrow from Manning’s conception of citizenship as having access to the federal government. I, however, reject her claim that citizenship manifested itself as an “alliance” with the soldiers. The word “alliance” is too symmetrical. It suggests that cooperation between the army and the refugees was clearly understood and that it was done between equal parties. I submit that this alliance is better understood as a “sense of belonging,” which was continually being drawn into focus and refashioned over the course of the march. The term alliance, in short, is too fixed.



know Massa; gwine along wid you all.”<sup>84</sup> A female refugee corroborated his claim when she responded to Oscar Jackson’s sarcastic inquiry. “Where are you going, auntie?” he asked. “I dunno,” she replied, “I’m just gwine along with you all.”<sup>85</sup> Their responses reveal that the refugees knew the work of emancipation remained unfinished. Their freedom was still conditional—still indefinite. Liberation, they realized, was not a singular event but an ongoing process with no clear end.

Following the army was thus an extension of one’s emancipation. Yet even if the refugees recognized it as such, leaving was not easy. Refugees had to not only decide if they would be safe on the march, they had to appraise whether they were physically able to make such a journey. The decision to march also meant the potential sundering of family ties. George Bradley, the Wisconsin chaplain, reported that a number of refugees informed him that they desired to go along, but “could not on account of their families.”<sup>86</sup> Sherman as well as other officials like Henry Hitchcock even deliberately discouraged male refugees from following the army by either explaining that the army could not care for women and children or bluntly refusing to allow families to come along.<sup>87</sup> They made sure that if a man decided to join the army, he did so after weighing his desire to leave against his sense of familial duty. For some, this dilemma was never as straightforward as

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<sup>84</sup> James Austin Connolly, *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland: The Letters and Diary of Major James A. Connolly*, Letters and Diary of Major Jame A. Connolly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), 311.

<sup>85</sup> Jackson, *The Colonel’s Diary*, 60–61,

<sup>86</sup> Bradley, *The Star Corps*, 188.

<sup>87</sup> Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 67, 71.

Sherman and his officers hoped it would be. While making the decision to leave could potentially fragment a family, it also doubled as a means of reconstituting a family torn apart at the auction block.

Consider the story of Ben and his wife Sally, two refugees who joined the army near Atlanta. Ben drove a team of horses for the Twentieth Corps, and Sally cooked for one of its officers. All of their children had been sold prior to the war. They knew nothing of their whereabouts, except that their then eight-year old daughter had been sold “down in what she called the lower country.” When other refugees fled into the Twentieth Corps camp, Sally would reportedly “scrutinize them closely” hoping to recognize any of her children and would “inquire for any clue where-by she might hear of them or perchance find them.” Near Savannah, one of their compatriots came to Sally, explaining that he had met another refugee named Joe, who had a wife named Nan who fit the description of Sally’s daughter. Immediately dropping her utensils and exclaiming, “de Lord be praised, I know its her,” Sally rushed to find them. When she met Nan, neither recognized each other at first, but after a series of questions, Sally reached a climactic conclusion. “Uan’s is my chile,” she screamed, “I knows uan’s is; I’se looked for you all the way down, an’ bless de good Lord, he’s sent uan’s to me.” Overcome with emotion, the two clasped on to each other and released “joyous screams” interspersed with “kissing and shedding of tears.” Ben then arrived and “the scene” repeated itself, “with all three hugging together and jumping up and down till they seemed exhausted.” Reverend John Potter of the 101<sup>st</sup> Illinois, the man who recorded the reunion, called it the “most powerful demonstration of human emotion” he had ever seen. His fellow soldiers,

he claimed, felt similarly, noting that they “were wonderfully moved when they knew what it all meant.”<sup>88</sup>

While Ben and Sally’s experience is exceptional, it exemplifies the enormous sense of opportunity embodied in the march. As dangerous as it may have been, the march provided a means of mobility, which had otherwise never been available to enslaved people. That one could reconnect with family or start a new life was no longer a forlorn hope but a real possibility. Many refugees sensed this opportunity and acted on it. Yet while Ben and Sally’s experience ended in a joyous reunion, it cannot be forgotten that most every refugee journey began with a goodbye—a farewell to the community that many refugees had known their entire lives. Nelson Stauffer recalled a refugee named Nat falling in behind them as they marched across the Ocmulgee River. When Nat told his fellow refugees “I’s e off,” Stauffer remembered that all the women “pull [*sic*] their big aprons to their face and began to cry.” “It was a sad parting scene,” he explained, “and to us a reminder of the tinder cord that was touched when we said “good by.””<sup>89</sup> Such was the reality of refugeedom. The start of a new life inevitably meant the closing of an old one.

When the refugees left their homes, many did so with their property in tow. Not expecting to return, they “dressed their best” and “packed into bundles” whatever food

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<sup>88</sup> Potter, *Reminiscences of the Civil War in the United States*, 109–11.

<sup>89</sup> Stauffer Nelson, *Civil War Diary* (Northridge: California State University, Northridge Libraries, 1976). See entry for Nov. 15, 1864.

and movable possessions they could muster.<sup>90</sup> Some even left riding much larger pieces of property, having requisitioned their masters' mule teams or riding their own horses. The Wisconsin chaplain George Bradley remembered seeing "whole families" join in the march "with some old mule team and wagon, having on board whatever household matters they could get together."<sup>91</sup> David P. Conyngham remembered seeing refugees piloting "Old buggies and wagons" being led by pack animals with "hampers and bags, stuffed with children and wearables [sic], balanced on each side." Indeed, "It was no unusual sight," he continued, "to see a black head, with large, staring eyes, peeping out of a sack at one side, and a ham of bacon or turkey balancing it at the other."<sup>92</sup>

These refugees, however, were fortunate. For every family that traveled by horse and buggy, there were others who traveled only on foot with "scarcely clothing enough to cover them." S. F. Fleharty, a soldier with the One-Hundred and Second Illinois Infantry, describes a particularly appalling sight. He claimed to have seen a "small, tough, and somewhat venerable negress" leading her family "in search of freedom." The woman bore a "bundle" upon her head and used her arms to sustain the child "clinging to her back." Following her was "a girl perhaps twelve years old" carrying "a young one in her arms" as well. "All were most wretchedly clothed," Fleharty remembered. "Their dresses," he wrote, "had been patched and repatched" as if "they had worn no others for

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<sup>90</sup> Conyngham, *Sherman's March Through the South*, 275.

<sup>91</sup> Bradley, *The Star Corps*, 195.

<sup>92</sup> Conyngham, *Sherman's March Through the South*, 277.

years.”<sup>93</sup> Whereas most soldiers regarded the refugees as “objects of pity,”<sup>94</sup> Fleharty saw something different. He saw real fortitude in the woman, noting that she wore a “disconsolate but determined look” as she “pressed on perseveringly with her burden.”<sup>95</sup> Though her road to freedom lay fraught with the material hazards of refugeedom in addition to the responsibilities of motherhood, the woman would not be denied. She pressed on.

As the march progressed, more soldiers began taking note of the men and women amassing behind the army. Diarist like Sgt. H. H. Enderton of the 101<sup>st</sup> Illinois reported on the growing number of refugees at the army’s rear, claiming that as of December 1<sup>st</sup>, there were “thousands of negroes with our army.”<sup>96</sup> At one point, the crowd had apparently gotten so large, an Illinois soldier quipped that “had the Union Army been so heartily in favor of negro troops, they might have organized whole brigades and divisions” as they marched.<sup>97</sup> Others commented on the refugees themselves, noting both the diverse make-up of the refugees as well as the various ways in which they traveled. Adin B. Underwood of the Thirty-Third Massachusetts posited that “They [the refugees]

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<sup>93</sup> Stephen F. Fleharty, *Our Regiment: A History of the 102d Illinois Infantry Volunteers, with Sketches of the Atlanta Campaign, the Georgia Raid, and the Campaign of the Carolines* (Brewster & Hanscom printers, 1865), 119.

<sup>94</sup> Illinois Infantry. 92d Regt., *Ninety-Second Illinois Volunteers*, 196.

<sup>95</sup> Fleharty, *Our Regiment*, 119.

<sup>96</sup> Diary of H. H. Enderton in Edwin Waters Payne, *History of the Thirty-Fourth Regiment of Illinois Volunteer Infantry. September 7 1861. July 12, 1965* (Clinton, Iowa: Allen printing, company, printers, 1903), 174.

<sup>97</sup> Illinois Infantry. 92d Regt., *Ninety-Second Illinois Volunteers*, 199.

joined from every cross-road and plantation in motley crowds.” From “grinning, slouching field hands” to “toothless old “Aunties”” these “motley reinforcements” he remarked, “swelled into an army of itself.”<sup>98</sup> J.R. Kinnear, a member of the Eighty-Sixth Illinois, remembered the refugees in a similar fashion. “It was really a ludicrous sight to see them trudging on after the army in promiscuous style and diverse manner,” he declared. While some rode in buggies of the “most costly and glittering manufacture” and others sported horses or traveled barefoot, all, he claimed, believed they were “bound for the Elysium of ease and freedom.”<sup>99</sup>

There is an obvious mocking tone to how men like Kinnear described the refugees. Racialized language, such as referring to African American children as “pickanninies” or elderly women as “Aunties,” and stereotypes like the “Sambo” or the “mammy,” pervaded the soldiers’ impressions of the refugees. There was an inherent tension, however, between how the soldiers depicted the refugees and how they interpreted their actions. Though the soldiers regarded the refugees as uncouth, uneducated, even exotic, most realized the gravity of the situation. That the refugees risked everything to make the march and continued to assist the soldiers whenever possible made a lasting impression on the men in blue—one at odds with the assumptions embedded in their sometimes snide comments.

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<sup>98</sup> Adin B. Underwood, *The Three Years’ Service of the Thirty-Third Mass. Infantry Regiment 1862-1865*, 243.

<sup>99</sup> Kinnear, *History of the Eighty-Sixth Regiment, Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 81.

Kinnear himself capped his disparaging depiction of the refugees with a caveat. “Let those who choose to curse the negro curse him,” he wrote, “but one thing is true, despite the unworthiness they bear on many minds, they were the only friends we could rely on for the sacred truth in the sunny land of Dixie.”<sup>100</sup> An infantryman from Illinois expressed a similar sentiment as he stood astounded at the scene around him. After deriding a group of refugees for being “unprepared for such a journey,” the man professed to think of nothing but “the old chestnut” lodged “in the mouth of every pro-slavery man in the North,” who believed “you could not hire them [the enslaved] to leave their masters.” “Here were men and women, from infancy to extreme old age, starting on a journey of month’s duration, hoping for freedom at the end,” he continued in amazement.<sup>101</sup> These realizations represent the power of the refugee experience and exemplify the soldiers’ early evolution. As more refugees flocked to the army, embittered soldiers began to sympathize with the refugees and acknowledge the commonality between them. That sympathy would morph into admiration and commonality would transform into solidarity is the march’s greatest triumph—its greatest legacy.

Once on the march, new challenges presented themselves. While the army would sometimes provide the refugees with excess food, most had to forage for themselves, picking over whatever the army decided not to take. The terrain also proved to be an issue. As one soldier noted, the closer the army got to Savannah, the more “interminable

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> William Wirt Calkins, *The History of the One Hundred and Fourth Regiment of Illinois Volunteer Infantry* (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, printers, 1895), 104.

swamps” had to be waded through in the “midst of winter.”<sup>102</sup> One can only imagine the frostbitten toes and weathered feet of the shoeless refugees traveling on foot. Despite these physical hardships, Confederate General Joseph Wheeler’s cavalry unit presented the most immediate threat. With General John Bell Hood’s Confederate army marching North into Tennessee and General William Hardee’s meager force retreating toward Savannah, Wheeler’s cavalry was the only military unit left to defend Georgia’s interior. By the battle of Griswoldsville, the only real engagement until Sherman reached Savannah, Wheeler resigned himself to skirmishing at Sherman’s rear. His force’s mobility meant that they could surprise the army—and the refugees—at any moment, often cutting off federal units from the main columns. The refugees faced the same problem. The farther the refugees marched from the army’s rear, the more susceptible they were to Confederate raids. Getting cut off or blocked from Sherman’s moving columns was a frightening reality, but as one soldier explained, the refugees always showed their resolve. By taking “circuitous routes” around the enemy and engaging in “much hard-marching,” the refugees would reappear at the army’s rear once again.<sup>103</sup>

Simply keeping up with an army in motion was a challenge in itself, especially for women and small children. Because so many male refugees served the army as cooks, valets, or pioneers, large numbers of women and small children often traveled alone and on foot. Not only did the absence of a husband or father pose a burden, but without a wagon or horse, they had no “safe space” to call home—no place that, when the march

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>103</sup> Kinnear, *History of the Eighty-Sixth Regiment, Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 84.



reached its most chaotic points, they could turn to for shelter and security. As a result, keeping a family intact amidst the demands of war was a difficult if not impossible proposition. One soldier remembered that near the Oconee River, “all was crowded and in confusion,—marching troops, wagons, cannon, ambulances and horseman being packed together in mass, and all moving onward.” Among the chaos, he saw a “a little black boy” no more than “seven or eight years old” squirming through “this horse and that wagon, and crying ‘I want my mammy! I want my mammy!’” The drivers, caught up in the rush, “cracked their great whips” and roared, “get out of the way, you little black nig; out of the way, there, or you’ll be killed!” No one, however, stopped to help the poor boy. His cry, the soldier claimed, “rang on till he was out of hearing.”<sup>104</sup>

Samuel Merrill’s regimental history of *The Seventeenth Indiana Volunteer Infantry in the War of the Rebellion* relates another bleak scene. In it, an officer claimed to have seen a female refugee hide two young boys in a wagon, intending “that they should see the land of freedom if she couldn’t.” The same officer explained that all along the march babies were often seen tumbling from “the backs of mules, to which they had been told to cling. A number of them, he went on, “were drowned in the swamps, while mothers stood by the roadside, crying for their lost children.”<sup>105</sup> For these women, desperation and despair pervaded their refugee experience. While the hope of a new

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<sup>104</sup> Hosea W. Rood, *Story of the Service of Company E, and of the Twelfth Wisconsin Regiment of Veteran Volunteer Infantry, in the War of the Rebellion. Beginning with September 7, 1861, and Ending July 21, 1865.* (n.p., 1898), 366.

<sup>105</sup> Samuel Merrill, *The Seventieth Indiana Volunteer Infantry in the War of the Rebellion* (Indianapolis: The Bowen-Merrill Company, 1900), 225.

identity was embedded in refugeedom, the circumstances of the march often challenged a refugees' most basic sense of self. As the scenes in Merrill's history indicate, even "motherhood" itself was challenged as refugee women weighed their interests, along with the interests of their children, against the burdens of their plight.

Indeed, the experience of African American women on the march is central to the refugee experience as a whole. Their suffering, along with their large numbers, caught the attention of soldiers. H.H. Enderton, an infantryman in the forty-seventh Illinois, went so far as to conclude that females expressed a greater desire for freedom than their male compatriots. "It appears that slave women are more anxious to be free than the men," he diarized, "and many a slave mother has carried her little child in her arms, endured the hunger and hardships of the march, to be free."<sup>106</sup> The scene George Pepper Whitfield witnessed at the "Negro shanty, some miles distant from Milledgeville" only reinforces Enderton's conclusion. It was the wife, after all, who castigated her husband for his hesitancy and proclaimed, " 'Yes, sar, I walks till I drap in my tracks.' "<sup>107</sup> As these experiences indicate, the story of refugeedom along the great march is one in which African American women played the leading role.

The reality that female refugees remained in a constant state of vulnerability compounded the power of their actions. Even kindly interactions with federal soldiers had to be vetted for risk as the threat of sexual predation never abated. Note the

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<sup>106</sup> Payne, *History of the Thirty-Fourth Regiment of Illinois Volunteer Infantry. September 7 1861. July 12, 1965*, 174.

<sup>107</sup> Pepper, *Personal Recollections of Sherman's Campaigns in Georgia and the Carolinas.*, 276–77.

sexualized language used by David P. Conyngham as he describes how federal officers were “very attentive to wants” of attractive refugees: “It would be vexatious to the Grand Turk or Brigham Young,” he claimed, “if they could only see how many of these dark houries were in the employment of officers’ servants and teamsters.”<sup>108</sup> The march was thus a minefield of potential dangers for black women. Remaining on guard was a must. Caution tempered enthusiasm and skepticism counterbalanced blind trust. To be sure, each refugee experienced these internal tensions. They are the hallmark of the refugee experience. But for women facing a range of potential dangers and heightened threat level, this internal struggle became more acute, more distressing, more agonizing. The experiences of black women are therefore an exemplification of the refugee experience in full. The eyes—and, indeed, the body—of the black female encapsulates the intense insecurity of refugeedom, providing a salient lens by which the emotive turmoil of the refugee experience can be analyzed. Their centrality to the refugee experience thus cuts in two directions.

At night, the mood along the march became more convivial. The permeable boundary between the blue coated, arms toting soldiers and the ragged refugees grew faint whenever tents were struck and campfires lit. Refugees whom the soldiers may have cursed during the day, became the soldiers’ chief source of amusement at night as the refugees were invited into the camps and instructed to dance. Just outside of Decatur, still

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<sup>108</sup> Conyngham, *Sherman’s March Through the South*, 277. Use of the Grand Turk and Brigham Young is a reference to polygamy while the term “Houries” refers to the Islamic nymphs of Paradise.

in the march's initial days, Rice K. Bull explained that the refugees became a "new source of almost constant fun" whenever the march halted for the night:

After the Negroes began to follow the army these "contrabands" swarmed our camp at night; they could sing and dance and the boys kept them busy. They sang the plantation hymns and songs and it was as natural for them to dance as to breathe. They often had banjos which they thumbed for music; when they had no banjos our boys would beat time on their knees with their hands; then no young darkey could keep his feet quiet and would dance as long as any one beat time.<sup>109</sup>

While camped outside of Louisville, Major James Connolly explained the march's evening activities in a similar fashion. That night, the "refugee negroes" performed a "a regular 'Plantation Dance.'" "They require neither fiddle nor banjo to make music," he remarked, "and the dancers need no prompter, but kick, and caper and and shuffle in the most complicated and grotesque manner their respective fancies can invent." Those not dancing "stand in a ring around the dancers" clap to the rhythm and sing "as loud and as fast and as furious as they can." Connolly couldn't help but ponder at the irony that the soldiers were "in the midst of a hostile country, engaged in a campaign which probably the whole world, at this moment, is predicting will end in our complete destruction," yet he had "spent the evening laughing" until his "head and sides" ached.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Bull and Bauer, *Soldiering*, 197.

<sup>110</sup> Connolly, *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland*, 332–33.

Sometimes, however, this “almost constant fun” took a perverse turn. Phil Towns, a former slave from Taylor County, Ga, ran off with Sherman’s army and claimed to have thought that “anything a Yankee said was true.” One soldier, perhaps in jest or perhaps out of his own base roguery, handed Towns a knife and instructed him to “cut the first man he met.” Towns followed instructions, even though he claimed to know his victim. That he makes no mention of receiving any sort of punishment for his actions suggests that Towns and his victim were both party to a dreadful trick whereby refugees were pitted against other refugees.<sup>111</sup>

These late evening interactions were critical to the soldier-refugee relationship. Despite Towns’s experience, camp festivities generally served as moments of bonding between Sherman’s men and those following their columns. As Williams Calkins of the One Hundred and Fourth Illinois indicates, that the refugees underwent hours of hard marching just to reach federal pickets did not go unnoticed.<sup>112</sup> The soldiers knew the difficulties of marching and would marvel at the refugees’ persistence when the same faces appeared night after night. Some refugees even attached themselves to specific brigades, learning the names of soldiers, numbers of particular regiments, and faces of ranking officers. While some soldiers certainly treated the freed people as foes, others grew fond of the refugees. Indeed, the soldiers described their evening “amusements” with condescension, but according to the Thirty-Third Indiana’s John McBride, the

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<sup>111</sup> W.P.A. Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Phil Towns, IV, 46.

<sup>112</sup> Calkins, *The History of the One Hundred and Fourth Regiment of Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 259.

refugees' "plaintive songs" and "natural love" of dancing "touched the kindly nature" of the soldiers, influencing them to treat the refugees "as humanely as the circumstances would permit."<sup>113</sup> Though signs of the refugees' humanity pervaded the march during the day, they were put on full display at night, manifesting themselves not as feats of courage or resiliency but as expressions of joy and sorrow through song and dance.

Pressing into federal camps also reinforced the refugees' claims to citizenship. The proximity between the refugees and the marching columns would inevitably widen during the day as unforeseen obstacles arose. Evening, however, represented a time whereby the refugees could close that distance and reassert their access to the army's security. They would march through the night, if circumstances required it, "not daring," Calkins notes, "to sleep outside the army's pickets."<sup>114</sup> With the army in a temporary state of inactivity, the refugees' relational understanding of refuge now had clear lines of demarcation. Once inside these lines, they made claims on the army moved beyond that of basic security. For example, the army felt compelled to provide the refugees with excess food and supplies.<sup>115</sup> What began as simply access to the U.S. government's real authority was thus evolving so as to include access to goods and services. The refugees'

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<sup>113</sup> John Randolph McBride, *History of the Thirty-Third Indiana Veteran Volunteer Infantry during the Four Years of Civil War, from Sept. 16, 1861, to July 21, 1865 : And Incidentally of Col. John Coburn's Second Brigade, Third Division, Twentieth Army Corps, Including Incidents of the Great Rebellion* (Indianapolis : Wm. B. Burford, printer and binder, 1900), 154.

<sup>114</sup> Calkins, *The History of the One Hundred and Fourth Regiment of Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 260.

<sup>115</sup> See Ibid.; McBride, *History of the Thirty-Third Indiana*, 154.; Jacob D. (Jacob Dolson) Cox, *The March to the Sea : Franklin and Nashville* (New York : Scribner, 1892), 37.

otherwise rudimentary claim to citizenship was growing more expansive—and legitimate— with each passing night.

The refugees' access to the army, however, had its limits. Sherman's refugee policy remained pliant, but some of his subordinates endeavored to enforce his initial directives, allowing only those who could be "of use" to follow along. It was not uncommon for refugees to be turned back at any stop, for example. While the soldiers could not physically prevent the refugees from following them, they often did their best to discourage the refugees from following along. "Their jubilee," one soldier remarked, "had to be postponed for military reasons."<sup>116</sup> Illinoisan Charles Willis saw "a squad of 30 or 40 turned back," for as he maintained, "Sherman's order is not to allow any more go with us than we can use and feed."<sup>117</sup> Some soldiers regarded this practice with disdain. These "pathetic scenes" happened, according to George Ward Nichols, "daily and hourly." "Thousands of negro women join the column," he explained, "some carrying household goods, and many of them carrying children in their arms, while older boys and girls plod by their side," but they were all ordered back to their plantations.<sup>118</sup>

Whether a group of refugees would be turned back or not depended almost entirely on their circumstances. The fortunate few were those able-bodied men and

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<sup>116</sup> Underwood, *The Three Years' Service of the Thirty-Third Mass. Infantry Regiment 1862-1865*, 244.

<sup>117</sup> Charles Wright Wills and Mary E. Kellogg, *Army Life of an Illinois Soldier, Including a Day by Day Record of Sherman's March to the Sea; Letters and Diary of the Late Charles W. Wills, Private and Sergeant 8th Illinois Infantry; Lieutenant and Battalion Adjutant 7th Illinois Cavalry; Captain, Major and Lieutenant Colonel 103rd Illinois Infantry* (Washington, D.C.: Globe Printing Company, 1906), 332.

<sup>118</sup> Nichols, *The Story of the Great March*, 71.

women who were incorporated into the army as laborers, cooks, or manservants. These men and women traveled with the army, ensuring their security for the duration of the march. Much like the black men who enlisted in black regiments, these men and women also regarded their service to the army as a badge of honor—as something that validated their freedom claims. After all, given that the army was an arm of the federal government, their service, though unpaid, made them all but federal employees.

Other refugees were not so fortunate, and whether one was turned back often depended on three factors: gender, geography, and the commanding general they encountered. It's no secret that the soldiers viewed female refugees, especially the ones traveling with families, as hindrances. Taking on the burden of an excessive number of women and children meant assuming responsibility for perennial dependents, people who would not only require provisions and care but people who would slow the army down. Male refugees, on the other hand, were thought of as people who could more or less fend for themselves and allow the march to go on undisturbed. Most importantly, however, the soldiers believed that men could easily be impressed into service of some kind. In the fourth year of a bloody war in which man-power would be a decisive factor, having a large labor force attached to the army was a significant advantage.

At what point along the march the refugees joined the army, however, proved to be even more determinative. From the start, Sherman's top priority was maintaining an adequate supply of food and other military necessities. So long as the horde of refugees following the army remained at a manageable size and did not consume too much of the army's already meager resources, refugees were thus typically allowed to remain with the



army. If a refugee joined the march in its initial stages, at places like Conyers, Covington, Social Circle, Madison, or Eatonton, where the crowd of refugees following the army was still relatively small, chances were good that he or she would be allowed to march on. Joining the army at locations further to the Southeast, places like Millen, Swainsboro, or Statesboro, however, spelled trouble for the refugees because the landscape had changed. The rolling fields of Georgia's fertile black belt gave way to the swampy, gnat infested thickets of coastal Georgia whose plantations yielded little to the forager except rice.<sup>119</sup> As Major-General Jacob D. Cox remembered, "When the lower and less fruitful lands were reached, the embarrassment and military annoyance [of the refugees] increased."<sup>120</sup> To make matters worse, whatever natural bounty the coastal landscape did produce had already been picked over by Confederate battalions. As a result, those refugees who joined the march in its latter stages had a much greater likelihood of being denied the opportunity to follow the army to freedom as Sherman's officers abided by their initial orders. When it came to supplies, "his [each commander's] first duty" was "to see to those who bear arms."<sup>121</sup>

Yet Sherman was not always the man responsible for the refugees' fate. While he served as the presiding general of the march, he subdivided his army into two wings and

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<sup>119</sup> William Passmore Carlin, *The Memoirs of Brigadier General William Passmore Carlin, U.S.A.* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 157.

<sup>120</sup> Cox, *The March to the Sea*, 37.

<sup>121</sup> Sherman to his Men, November 9, 1864 in William T. Sherman, "*War Is Hell!*": *William T. Sherman's Personal Narrative of His March through Georgia* (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1974), 146.

four army corps (two corps to each wing), with each corps having three divisions. As Major James Connolly put it, the army “spread out in so many columns, marching in so many different directions, threatening so many different points, and careering over the country in such *apparent* disorder, yet really *good order*.”<sup>122</sup> The power to order refugees back to the plantations, therefore, had to be delegated to Sherman’s subordinates. If the refugees were fortunate, they would have stumbled upon an army unit led by a man like Absalom Baird, who Connolly claimed was a nephew of noted abolitionist Gerritt Smith and “quite an abolitionist” in his own right. According to Connolly, Baird delighted in talking with refugees and on one occasion invited a refugee named Jerry, who later became a camp favorite, to ride along with his staff. If the refugees were not as fortunate, they encountered a unit commanded directly by General Jeff C. Davis, Baird’s immediate superior and commander of the Fourteenth Army Corps.<sup>123</sup> There was no more of a villainous figure on the march than Jeff C. Davis. Though he was a distinguished field officer, his disdain for African Americans was well known. John Hight, a Chaplain in the Indiana Fifty-Eighth Infantry, described him as a “military tyrant, without one spark of humanity in his makeup.” According to Hight, Davis had been “an ardent pro-slavery man” before the war and, as Hight suggested, “has not changed his views since.” It is no

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<sup>122</sup> Connolly, *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland*, 336.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 339–40. Absalom Baird was Gerritt Smith’s nephew in law. He married the daughter of Smith’s brother, Peter S. Smith.

surprise then, that the greatest tragedy to befall the refugees occurred under his watch, indeed, under his direct orders.<sup>124</sup>

On December 8, Davis, the Fourteenth Corps, and the refugees following his columns approached Ebenezer Creek, a swampy tributary of the Savannah river located less than forty miles north of Savannah. Four days prior, Davis's Fourteenth Corps crossed a similar body of water, a much smaller branch of the Ogeechee known as Buckhead Creek. As was the case at Ebenezer, the bridge at Buckhead Creek was out, causing Davis and the army to cross via a temporary pontoon bridge. By that time, a "whole army" of refugees marched behind the army's rear guard, becoming, as one soldier claimed, an "unbearable nuisance."<sup>125</sup> Davis decided to block the refugees' advance by ordering that they not be allowed to cross. After the army made its way over the bridge, the order came to remove the pontoons.<sup>126</sup> Realizing that they were to be abandoned, the refugees, standing on the opposite bank, began to cry out in despair. Suddenly, a different cry rang out. A squad of Confederates, someone exclaimed, was

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<sup>124</sup> John J. Hight and Gilbert R. Stormont, comp, *History of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment of Indiana Volunteer Infantry. Its Organization, Campaigns and Battles from 1861 to 1865* (Princeton: Press of the Clarion, 1895), 426–27. Gilbert R. Stormont compiled this history, but the text was taken from the manuscript papers of his comrade, John Hight.

<sup>125</sup> John Henry Otto, David Gould, and James B. Kennedy, *Memoirs of a Dutch Mudsill: The "war Memories" of John Henry Otto, Captain, Company D, 21st Regiment, Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2004), 306.

<sup>126</sup> Otto claims that Sherman gave the order to pull up the bridge, but other soldiers lay the blame squarely on Davis. See Connolly, *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland*, 347, 373-374.; John J. Hight and Gilbert R. Stormont, comp, *History of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment of Indiana Volunteer Infantry. Its Organization, Campaigns and Battles from 1861 to 1865*, 426-427. Michael Fitch suggests that no one knew who gave the orders. See Michael Hendrick Fitch, *Echoes of the Civil War as I Hear Them* (R. F. Fenno & company, 1905), 236.

fast approaching. Though this would later prove to be untrue, the refugees propelled themselves into the water. Standing on the opposite bank, the scene was apparently too much for some of the soldiers to take as they launched planks and timbers into the water to buoy the “frantic” refugees struggling to stay afloat. Some of the refugees never made it across.<sup>127</sup> How many, John Hight noted, is not known, but Brevet Colonel Michael Fitch suggests that as many as five women lost their lives.<sup>128</sup> A large number of the refugees, therefore, did in fact reach the opposite river bank. As one particularly crass soldier remarked, “the darkies were not to be outwitted so easy.”<sup>129</sup>

At Ebenezer Creek, Davis remained resolute. His intentions were clear: the refugees were not to follow the army any longer. He again employed his “dastardly trick,” placing a detachment of the rear guard on each side of the bridge so as to prevent the refugees from making it across.<sup>130</sup> And again, as soon as the last soldier reached the river’s opposite bank, he ordered that the bridge be pulled up, leaving the refugees all alone on the other side. This time, however, the cry that a Confederate cavalry unit was, indeed, grounded in truth, but the warning did not force the refugees into the water. As Brigadier General William Passmore Carlin remembered, “The rear guard had no sooner

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<sup>127</sup> Hight and Stormont, *History of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment of Indiana Volunteer Infantry. Its Organization, Campaigns and Battles from 1861 to 1865*, 426–27.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*; Fitch, *Echoes of the Civil War as I Hear Them*, 236.

<sup>129</sup> Otto, Gould, and Kennedy, *Memoirs of a Dutch Mudsill*, 306.

<sup>130</sup> Robert G. Athearn, “An Indiana Doctor Marches With Sherman: The Diary of James Comfort Patten,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, December 1, 1953, 419.

crossed the creek than Wheeler's cavalry charged into the crowd of refugees." The quick thinking immediately threw themselves into the water, hoping to swim across the "very broad and deep stream" that Carlin described as "a bayou or arm of the Savannah."<sup>131</sup> Shocked by the scene, some of the soldiers began throwing felled logs into the water to save them, but it was too late.<sup>132</sup> The Confederates began firing upon the refugees in the water, while those remaining on the river bank "ran wildly up and down the stream," hurling out "heartrending cries of despair."<sup>133</sup> Very few refugees made it across. Others never made it into the water to begin with. The refugees Wheeler's men caught up to were either killed on the spot, taken as prisoners, or sent back to their former masters.<sup>134</sup> As David P. Conyngham wrote, "it proved to them to be a Red Sea" absent of God's protection, for "Wheeler's cavalry charged on them, driving them, pell-mell into the waters, and mothers and children, old and young, perished alike!"<sup>135</sup>

On the opposite riverbank, the betrayal at Ebenezer Creek produced a dismal sight. Soaked and in disarray, the men and women who made it across looked for familiar faces, but some never found them. Ebenezer's cold current swept parents from children and spouses from partners. An officer in the 92<sup>nd</sup> Illinois remembered locating a woman

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<sup>131</sup> Carlin, *The Memoirs of Brigadier General William Passmore Carlin, U.S.A.*, 157–58.

<sup>132</sup> Calkins, *The History of the One Hundred and Fourth Regiment of Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 259.

<sup>133</sup> Illinois Infantry. 92d Regt., *Ninety-Second Illinois Volunteers*, 200.

<sup>134</sup> Carlin, *The Memoirs of Brigadier General William Passmore Carlin, U.S.A.*, 157–58.

<sup>135</sup> Conyngham, *Sherman's March Through the South*, 277.

who, when she joined, claimed she would go along with the army “or perish.” The small child who accompanied her, however, had been lost to the current. Further up the column, the same officer encountered a “negro man and woman” whose “little boy” was “drowned” during the crossing. The poor mother “was crying as though her heart would break,” leading the officer to conclude that the boy “was as dear” to his mother’s heart “as if she and her child were white.” These scenes of disconsolate families dealing with death on the doorstep of freedom disturbed the officer. “The sights I this morning witnessed I cannot get out of my head,” he wrote as he retired for the night.<sup>136</sup>

The soldier was not alone. What happened at Ebenezer Creek had a profound effect on the soldiers. Many of the victims, after all, had been people the soldiers had known, had watched dance, or had beckoned to come along. Their vague, noncommittal, and always asymmetrical relationship with the refugees, they realized, had failed, placing death and injustice in the palms of their hands. Some soldiers directed their outrage toward Davis himself. Indiana Doctor James Comfort Patten remarked that if he “had the power” he would hang “him [Davis] high as Haman.”<sup>137</sup> “And those people our friends,” another wrote in reference to the refugees before proclaiming, “Let the ‘iron pen of history’ write the comment on this action of a Union General.”<sup>138</sup> Major James Connolly

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<sup>136</sup> Illinois Infantry. 92d Regt., *Ninety-Second Illinois Volunteers*, 198.

<sup>137</sup> Athearn, “An Indiana Doctor Marches With Sherman,” 419–20. Haman is a reference to the antagonist in the book of Esther. After Esther, a Jew, discovers that Haman attempted to convince the king to kill all of Jews, he is sentenced to death by hanging.

<sup>138</sup> Illinois Infantry. 92d Regt., *Ninety-Second Illinois Volunteers*, 200.

went so far as to write a letter to his local congressman denouncing Davis's actions. He provided a copy to his commanding general, Absalom Baird, who sent the letter to the *New York Tribune*. After the fall of Fort McAllister and subsequently the city of Savannah, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton brought a copy of the letter with him when he arrived for his fateful meeting with Sherman and a number of Savannah's black leaders. He made Davis answer for its contents, but in the end, nothing was done. Davis kept his commission and led his men as they marched northward through the Carolinas.

For other soldiers, Ebenezer Creek (Ebenezer ironically means "stone of help") was a tragic display of how far refugees would go to reach freedom. To men like Jacob Cox, it demonstrated that "it was literally preferable to die as a freeman rather than live as a slave."<sup>139</sup> This realization precipitated a stark alteration in how the soldiers viewed the march, its purpose, its meaning, and, indeed, the meaning of the war itself. The refugee's cause became a cause worth fighting for as more soldiers reached Cox's conclusion and began to share the sentiments of an infantryman with the 92<sup>nd</sup> Illinois, who wrote of Ebenezer: "And what is it all for? It is for freedom; They are periling their lives for freedom, and it seems to me that any people who run such risks are entitled to freedom." "As they have been allowed to come along part of the way, unmolested," the same infantryman continued to fume, "I believe it is a burning shame and disgrace, and inhuman to leave them to struggle in thirty feet of water for their lives; for they prefer sinking to the water to returning to slavery."<sup>140</sup> Such was the effect of Ebenezer Creek. It

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<sup>139</sup> Cox, *The March to the Sea*, 38.

<sup>140</sup> Illinois Infantry. 92d Regt., *Ninety-Second Illinois Volunteers*, 197.

demonstrated just how far refugees were willing to go to achieve freedom, which, in turn, provided the soldiers a deeper understanding of both emancipation and refugeedom.

What the march meant for the future of four million enslaved Americans finally drew into focus.

Tragic as it may have been, the betrayal at Ebenezer Creek only accelerated an evolution that began when the first refugee sought shelter with Sherman's army. For some of the soldiers who witnessed its sights and sounds, the betrayal was undoubtedly a pivotal moment. Its affect on the soldiers cannot be denied, and its legacy cannot be severed from the march's popular memory. It was, however, only a climactic episode in a daily routine. During each day's trek and at every night's encampment, Georgia's refugees forged a union with the army and expressed a fierce determination to reach freedom. They acted in ways bold yet sometimes anodyne, primitive as well as sophisticated, but they never quit, a quality that struck a chord with the increasingly idealistic soldiers. Like S.F. Fleharty, who witnessed the refugeeed mother trudging along in tatters, or the men of the 101<sup>st</sup> Illinois who saw Ben and Sally reunite with their daughter, Sherman's men grew to admire the refugees and grasp the power of freedom, seeing both the refugees' humanity and the humanity of black freedom. Braving refugeedom's perpetual barrage of dangers on a daily basis precipitated such a transformation. The decision to leave was just the beginning.



## CHAPTER THREE

### A New Plymouth

In his history of the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, the oldest African American congregation in the United States, reverend James M. Simms reflected on the day Sherman's army marched into the city. "When the morning light of the 22d of December, 1864, broke in upon us," he wrote, "the streets of our city were thronged in every part with the victorious army of liberty; every tramp, look, command, and military movement told us that they had come for our deliverance, and were able to secure it to us." Cries of "Glory be to God, we are free!" echoed across the city, emanating from the homes of Savannah's enslaved men and women. Unlike two years prior, when news of the Emancipation Proclamation reached the city, there was no need to withhold excitement for fear of retribution. The federal army had arrived; they were now free. Simms himself expressed his excitement by quoting from Psalms 10, which he editorialized into the text: "Shout the glad tidings o'er Egypt's dark sea/ Jehovah has triumphed, his people are free!" So far as Simms knew, the year of Jubilee had indeed come at last.<sup>141</sup>

For the roughly 17,000 refugees who followed the federal army into the city, Savannah was merely another step in the process of emancipation. Though some heralded Savannah as their final city of refuge, arriving in the city only reinforced the realities of

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<sup>141</sup> James M. Simms, *First Colored Baptist Church in North America: Constituted at Savannah, Georgia, January 20, A.D. 1988, With Biographical Sketches of the Pastors* (Philadelphia, 1888), 137.

their displacement. They had no homes, no dependable supply of rations, and no one knew what being in the city, much less being stationary, would mean for their lives as refugees. Indeed, the new environment generated new questions, the answers to which could potentially realign the refugees' relationship with the army and undo their efforts during the march. Even shrouded in this uncertainty, however, the refugees entered the city armed with the knowledge that emancipation was a process in need of sustaining, something Simms and his fellow Savannahians had yet to learn. Freedom, the refugees knew, came neither at the point of a bayonet nor the tip of a pen but in an ongoing struggle to legitimize their independence and assert control over their own lives. That struggle took shape on the march and continued in Savannah. This chapter, therefore, examines how the occupation of Savannah reshaped the refugee struggle. It demonstrates that, despite a host of new challenges, the refugees still managed to transform their expectations of a post-emancipation America into reality.

Occupation required permanent solutions. Unlike on the march, where stopgap procedures and malleable policies satisfied the circumstances at hand, the army's month long respite in Savannah demanded a coordinated program for dealing with the refugees. Sherman and his men thus found themselves in uncomfortable positions. They now had to be not simply conquerors or liberators but administrators. To be sure, the daily routines of army life required a team of talented officials to coordinate rations, supplies, wages, along with a bevy of other duties, but dealing with roughly 17,000 refugees was an altogether different task. Not only was it a humanitarian issue, it was also inherently political. The steps taken to resolve the status of the refugees during the war meant asking

what the status of African Americans would be in a reconstructed America. As he maintained throughout the war, Sherman felt it was best to leave such issues to politicians, but he soon realized the position he was in. Whether he liked it or not, the onus of what was to come of the refugees fell upon his shoulders, and he believed he had to act, not necessarily on behalf of the freed people but for the sake of military expediency.

The most pressing issue was the basic lack of shelter. On the march, refugees slept wherever they could find space so long as they were inside the army's pickets. They slept in their wagons, if they had them, excess military tents, or simply on the ground under the night sky. Such a set-up worked for the transient circumstances of the march, but it was an untenable arrangement for longer encampments. Sherman and his men, therefore, mimicked the model established elsewhere in the South. The freed men and women were organized into refugee camps and expected to work for the army when asked—or commanded. In reality, however, these camps functioned as little more than temporary fixes. Their only benefit was that they bought Sherman and his officials more time to develop sounder solutions.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> There is little documentation of these camps. Extant documentation refers to the King's Bridge camp on the Ogeechee river. Judging by the size of the King's Bridge encampment in comparison to the total number of refugees, it is safe to assume that other temporary camps had to be established for the refugees. One explanation for the lack of documentation is that only ten days elapsed between when the army arrived at the city and when the city was taken, allowing many refugees to find housing within the city. There was even less time between their arrival in the city and when the decision was made to begin transporting refugees to Port Royal, which will be discussed later in the chapter. In short, as soon as the camps were built, they were being torn down and abandoned for other accommodations.

One such camp was built on the banks of the Ogeechee River. In the roughly ten days between the army's arrival in Savannah and the eventual taking of the city, close to 1,200 refugees pitched camp near King's Bridge, a landing on the Ogeechee that afforded the army access to the Atlantic and, consequently, an abundance of fresh rations. Charles E. Smith of the Thirty-Second Ohio Volunteer Infantry was one of seven men charged with overseeing the crude bivouac. While he and the members of his team ensured that the refugees received at least a share of those rations, living conditions were primitive at best. A "few old tents" and what Smith called "pole and brush shanties" were all that stood between the refugees and the "uncommonly cold" winter weather. The harsh conditions, however, did not dampen the refugees' spirits. The same late evening festivities that occurred during the march went on per usual. Smith reported that "Crowds of men and women gathered around the preachers" and "would sing hymns, pray and preach and hold out till nearly midnight" unless ordered to stop by one of the officers. Just as they did on the march, the refugees were adamant about expressing their optimism, as well as their humanity, through hours of worship and prayer. Indeed, the process of emancipation may have been fraught with hardscrabble conditions and innumerable setbacks, but faith prevailed. The promise of jubilee, they knew, required perseverance, which meant treating something as odious as a refugee camp as if it were a minor hitch in a much grander, even divine, plan.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Charles E. Smith et al., *A View from the Ranks: The Civil War Diaries of Charles E. Smith, Citizen Soldier, 32nd O.V.I. Delaware County, Ohio* (Delaware, OH, 1999), 465.

Not long after settling in camp, Sherman issued a set of orders that reshaped the refugee experience. He decided to transport a number of refugees to Hilton Head, one of South Carolina's sea islands that since 1862 had been home to a colony of freed people and northern abolitionists, rather than have them stay in the city. Known as the Port Royal Experiment, the colony at Port Royal resettled freed people on confiscated plantation lands and facilitated the ex-slaves' development as free laborers. Northern missionaries aided in the resettling process by administering humanitarian aid, creating freedmen's schools, and holding regular church services. While the program experienced its own set of problems, the area around Port Royal Sound became a haven for freed men and women across the Lowcountry, making it a perfect location for Sherman to send the refugees.

On the surface, incorporating the refugees into the Port Royal Experiment seemed like an ideal scenario for all involved. For Sherman, not only would it distance the refugees from the ongoing military operations around Savannah, it would satisfy his ultimate goal: ridding himself of responsibility for their care. The refugees, meanwhile, would be housed in a safe environment where they could not only receive greater care but begin to enjoy the fruits of an unencumbered freedom, the optics of which would only strengthen Sherman's image in the northern press—an ideal scenario, indeed.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> See Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964); See "General Sherman Vindicated," *The Liberator*, Feb. 3, 1865. Sherman's effort to relocate African Americans, both in this instance and later with the passage of his Field Order 15, assuaged many of those who criticized him for the catastrophe at Ebenezer Creek.

Major James Connolly witnessed one of the earliest groups of Hilton Head bound refugees make their departure. “It was a strange spectacle to see those negroes of all ages, sizes, and both sexes, with their bundles on their heads and in their hands trudging along,” wrote James Connolly as he watched the refugees march by. “They knew not wither,” he remarked, “but were willing to blindly follow the direction given them by our officers.”<sup>145</sup> On December 22, amidst jeers that hailed the marching refugees as the “African Brigade” or the “Ethiopian Corps,” the [500]refugees boarded the steamer that would soon ferry them to Hilton Head, where they would begin new lives on the shores of South Carolina. Over the next few weeks, that number would grow to over 5,000.<sup>146</sup>

The Sea Islands, however, proved to not be the sanctuary some thought they would be. By January, many of Sherman’s men had been sent to Beaufort, the upriver community once home to some of the wealthiest cotton barons in the South. These men reportedly “bore no love for the colored people,” causing an onlooker to assert that the freed people must “think the “good old secesh times” have come back” from the way white men romped the streets “kicking and knocking them [the freed people] about.” That same onlooker claimed that nothing was safe. The men reportedly entered “every colored man’s house” and harassed its inhabitants before “appropriating to themselves whatever they could find.” While surprising to some, these scenes were nothing new to the refugees. They were mere repetitions of what happened whenever federal soldiers

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<sup>145</sup> Connolly, *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland*, 467-68

<sup>146</sup> Smith et al., *A View from the Ranks*, 466.

descended upon plantations during the march. Those same apprehensions that imbued soldier-refugee interactions during the march were thus carried over to the Sea Islands and reapplied in a different context. Caution had to temper blind faith and every white man still had to be vetted for hostility. Even as constituents in a state sanctioned program designed to support freed people in their transition out of bondage, their vulnerability was inescapable. The dangers of life as a refugee never abated.<sup>147</sup>

Living conditions were also only marginally better than those experienced in the refugee camps. With thousands of freed people already living on the islands in their own communities, the influx of new refugees taxed the colony's meager resources. Indeed, H.G. Judd, a superintendent tasked with overseeing freedmen affairs, describes the bleak scene facing the first arrivals. Most, he gathered, were "women, old men, and children," who "had traveled from Macon, Atlanta", and even as far as "Chattanooga." Though few showed signs of disease, he noted that "all were foot-sore and weary." The winter weather, however, inhibited anyone from finding immediate relief. For the first night, all 700 "were housed—packed—in a disused commissary building" until the following morning, when 400 hundred were separated from the others and marched off under guard to a makeshift encampment. From there, they were scattered among a number of plantations and assigned to the "few tenements" available. They were then given food "so far as possible" and supplied with "blankets and linsey for women," but only what the "contraband fund could furnish." Clothes, stockings, shoes, even thread were all unavailable, which produced grave consequences. Two hundred of the four hundred

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<sup>147</sup> "Chronicles of War," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Jan. 28, 1865.

resettled refugees had grown “sick though exposure” and, as Judd put it, “coffins go out each day.” As Judd’s account indicates, the Port Royal Experiment may have been designed as a safe haven for freed people and refugees, but the financial and logistical constraints of war often meant that reality fell short of ideals.<sup>148</sup>

Judd’s report underscores another issue with resettlement. The refugees were thrust into pre-existing communities, many of which had been established long before guns fired at Fort Sumter. Integrating into these communities could not have made for a smooth transition. New, indispensable skills had to be learned, diets had to be altered, and labor routines had to be adjusted to. To make matters worse, the notable cultural differences between the Lowcountry and the Southern black belt from which many of the refugees originated rendered the refugees foreigners in what had to have been a strange, exotic land. Gullah, a cultural tradition grafted from the folkways of West Africa and ingrained in the island communities of South Carolina and Georgia, was a fact of life among freed people native to Port Royal. For the refugees, however, linguistic differences were yet another barrier to assimilation. Though there is little evidence indicating how refugees reacted to these challenges or if they experienced them at all, the totality of the refugee experience cannot be overlooked. For so many, being a refugee meant beginning an entirely new life and adopting a new identity.

To resolve the issue of supplies, General Rufus Saxton, the officer charged with overseeing the settlements around Port Royal, turned to a familiar well: the ever-flowing

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<sup>148</sup> “General Sherman’s Freedmen,” *New York Daily Tribune*, Jan. 17, 1965.



fount of Northern charity. It was a resource for which Saxton possessed real leverage. Earlier during the army's occupation of Savannah, Colonel Julian Allen, a former Union soldier from New York, was sent by Savannah's city council to New York and Boston. His mission was to procure charitable donations in the form of cash payments, food, and supplies for the "suffering and destitute inhabitants" of the city.<sup>149</sup> By the middle of January, twenty-one thousand dollars had been raised and three steamships full of food, clothing, blankets, and even children's toys were making their way toward the port of Savannah.<sup>150</sup> The white North had done their part in helping a people "whose suffering have awakened such universal sympathy."<sup>151</sup> Now Saxton and the leadership at Port Royal hoped the same selfless benevolence could be transferred to Americans of a different skin color.

Saxton knew a similar financial commitment would go a long way in furnishing the Port Royal Experiment with supplies needed to provide for the refugees. News of the effort to aid Savannah had been in the papers, and Saxton hoped that it would embolden the Freedmen's Relief Association, as well as unaffiliated abolitionists and other Northerners, into doing their part. "They [the refugees] have arrived on the coast after long marches and severe privations, weary, famished, sick, and almost naked," he

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<sup>149</sup> City of Savannah City Council Minutes, 1863-1869, p.135. Quoted in John P. Dyer, "Northern Relief for Savannah During Sherman's Occupation," *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1953).

<sup>150</sup> Dyer, "Northern Relief for Savannah During Sherman's Occupation," 468.

<sup>151</sup> "RELIEF FOR SAVANNAH.; Meeting at the Produce Exchange Remarks of Col. Allen Correspondence Between the Chamber of Commerce and the Produce Exchange. Board of Education. No More Presentations." *New York Times*, Jan. 12, 1865.

pleaded in a joint-letter signed by the leadership at Port Royal and syndicated in the major newspapers. “Seven hundred of these wretched people arrived at Beaufort Christmas night in a state of misery which would have moved to pity a heart of stone,” he went on, “and these are but the advance of a host no less destitute.” His appeals were earnest, frank, and no doubt shocking to Northern readers. “So extreme and entire is their destitution,” he implored them, “that nothing which you can afford to give will go amiss.” From “shoes and stockings, hats, suspenders, undergarments,” even “utensils, medicine,” and “money”, anything they could give would be put to use and appreciated.<sup>152</sup>

Saxton’s gambit worked, but only to a point. His appeals mobilized Northern whites, who were indeed cognizant of their earlier success in supplying Savannah. “The very last cause for which we drew our purse-strings makes it impossible for us to tighten them against this,” wrote a representative of the National Freedman’s Relief Association. “We have fed with abundant liberality the people of Savannah,” the representative continued, “Let us match that act of politic philanthropy to those who but a moment since were our enemies, by at least an act of equal generosity to those who never for a moment have been anything but our friends.”<sup>153</sup> The National Freedmen’s Relief Association responded by calling for an assortment of vital goods, such as blankets, flannel, women’s suits, spades, hoes, and seeds.<sup>154</sup> A branch of the Society of Friends (Quakers) reacted in

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<sup>152</sup> “General Sherman’s Freedmen,” *New York Daily Tribune*, Jan. 17, 1865

<sup>153</sup> “Sherman’s Freedmen,” *New York Daily Tribune*, Jan. 17, 1865.

<sup>154</sup> “The Needs of the Freedmen,” *New York Daily Tribune*, Jan. 20, 1865.

kind. After hearing from a committee who had lived among the freed people near Fortress Monroe, the congregation took up contributions and made arrangements for creating “subscription lists” as soon as possible.<sup>155</sup>

How much support was actually raised, as well as whether Saxton’s appeals touched those outside of abolitionists circles, is not known. It is unlikely, however, that Saxton’s attempts at relief matched the success of the relief effort for Savannah. Nevertheless, his campaign is important because it underscores the reality of the situation. Not only were conditions on the coast growing increasingly dire, but with the end of the war in sight, a spirit of reconciliation began to permeate the white North’s collective consciousness. The refugees’ cause now had a new counterpart as there developed a growing dissonance between those seeking racial justice and other who yearned for white rapprochement. Mitigating this disparity would be one of the great tasks of Reconstruction. Saxton’s relief effort was thus both an indictment of the situation at Port Royal as well as an early harbinger of the challenges to come.

Despite relocating as many as 5,000 refugees on the Sea Islands, resettlement at Port Royal was an initiative that could not solve Sherman’s refugee crisis in its entirety. Thousands of refugees still remained in and around Savannah, and their ranks were growing by the day. Indeed, with Sherman’s army firmly entrenched inside the city, Savannah became the epicenter of an urban migration comprised almost exclusively of African Americans. Enslaved men and women from plantation districts south of the city

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<sup>155</sup> “Meeting of the Friends’ Association for the Relief of Freedmen,” *New York Daily Tribune*, Jan.27, 1865.

began fleeing north to Savannah as soon as word of Sherman's arrival reached them. Once there, these men and women blended into the refugee population who had traveled from the opposing direction, making Savannah a coastal enclave where refugees of varying backgrounds, cultures, and wartime experiences could find asylum.

At first glance, Savannah would seem well suited to accommodate such a large influx of men and women. Its famous grid-like design, with city squares and parks situated every few blocks, provide open areas for the construction of temporary encampments. Yet even with its favorable design, the army's size was simply too much for the city to handle. The "crush of humanity" that was Sherman's sixty-thousand-man army, along with the thousands of refugees who flowed into the city at the army's rear and from elsewhere, "overran and overwhelmed the city."<sup>156</sup> Its picturesque squares were transformed into overcrowded heaps of makeshift shanties and tent villages, which housed men who had grown used to exercising wanton theft, destruction, and rowdy behavior. What was once a charming port city was now a vulgar crucible of war for which soldiers, citizens, and refugees were all forced to share. As white Savannahians' nestled into their homes, adjusting their lives to the constraints of occupation, and Sherman's men laid claim to whatever urban green-space they could find, the refugees were relegated to the city's dingy alleyways and the dilapidated docks along the river. Their vision of Jubilee, which promised a redistribution of land and equity among

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<sup>156</sup> Jaqueline Jones, *Saving Savannah: The City and the Civil War* (New York: Random House, 2008), 214.

peoples, had been met by a harsh reality of disease, street mice, and nights spent sleeping on cold, cobble-stoned streets.<sup>157</sup>

Savannah's African American churches, however, sought to keep the vision of Jubilee alive by providing a haven for the refugees. James M. Simms's First African Baptist Church, for example, had been a beacon in Savannah's black community for nearly a century, and its tradition of community organizing continued during Sherman's occupation. The church, according to Simms, welcomed the "scattered and wandering" refugees and placed them under "watchful care" until they became "settled in the fold of Christ."<sup>158</sup> Its congregation, in turn, swelled, which only strengthened the church's commitment to its displaced brethren, even to those of different denominations. "All who could account for themselves were welcomed to share in the privileges and blessings of this old *Zion of God* (Italics added)," Simms wrote, suggesting that he and the church conceived of their task as part and parcel of a larger Christian mission.<sup>159</sup> Their role was not simply to minister to other Baptists or even to those in need. Rather, the church was to be an inclusive temple whereby an entire people could facilitate their understanding a new world to come.<sup>160</sup> For the congregants of the First African Baptist Church, such a

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 214-15.

<sup>158</sup> Simms, *The First Colored Baptist Church in North America*, 138.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>160</sup> The phrase "world to come" is often used in reference to the Jewish understanding of the hereafter, one's life after death. It and the word Zion can be used as metonyms of each other.

mission meant acting in solidarity with the refugees as they both projected forward and envisioned a new America.

Savannah's black pastorate provided the leadership needed to enact such a vision. The refugees themselves could conceive of what emancipation should mean, but they needed a cadre of experienced leaders to articulate that message in a way that would net tangible gains. The refugees, after all, were considered dependents, if not indigents. They therefore lacked the political capital necessary for their interests to be taken seriously. Most of Savannah's black pastors, in contrast, had been free prior to the war and enjoyed the elevated social stature that accompanies community leadership. What political capital the refugees lacked, the pastors possessed, at least to the degree that it was possible for black men to possess political power in the Civil War South. They thus became the natural candidates to represent the interests of not just the refugees but freed people across the region.

On January 12, 1865, twenty such leaders convened a meeting that would reshape black life in the Low-country. With thousands of refugees still in Savannah, Sherman needed a permanent solution, one that would solve his refugee problem once and for all. He and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, therefore, met with twenty of Savannah's black ministers to discuss emancipation and its aftermath. The ministers chose Garrison Frazier, a former slave who purchased his and his wife's freedom only eight years prior, as their spokesman. What transpired was a deposition-like inquiry into the state of the freed people, their expectations of freedom, and how best to ensure these expectations were met. Stanton asked probing questions designed to both gather answers and test

Frazier's understanding of the situation. To each question, Frazier responded in a poised, self-assured manner. He answered the questions in full, and did so in a way that was clear, concise, and cogent.

When asked to state his understanding of slavery and freedom, for instance, Frazier replied, "Slavery is, receiving by *irresistible power* the work of another man, and not by his *consent*." "The freedom, as I understand it, promised by the proclamation," he continued, "is taking us from under the yoke of bondage, and placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor, take care of ourselves and assist the Government in maintaining our freedom." As to how he thought he and his fellow freed people could best take care of themselves and maintain freedom, he explained that land ownership was the most salient mechanism by which freedom could be realized. The goal, he said, was to "have land, turn it and till it by our own labor." If land could not be immediately obtained, he advocated for a system whereby "we [freed people] could be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own." In exchange, the freed people would voluntarily "enlist in the service of the government, and serve in such manner as they may be wanted." His message was clear. Thousands of African American men had already signed up to serve in the United States' Colored Troops, and thousands more were willing to "shoulder the musket" in the name of freedom.<sup>161</sup>

What is so striking about Frazier's interview is not necessarily his specific answers but that when the interview is read as a whole, it becomes a blueprint for how the

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<sup>161</sup> Ira Berlin, ed., *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom and the Civil War* (New York: New Press, 1992), 310-18

promises of Jubilee could be fulfilled. His notion of freed people being placed on the land could only be achieved via some system of land redistribution. Large plantations would have to be deconstructed and parceled out in equitable plots, which would then be worked according to the wishes of freed people. They would neither be slaves nor wage laborers but independent producers, men and women who controlled their own labor as well as the fruits of that labor produced. In short, they would be “self-masters,” a concept at the ideological core of basic republican thinking. According to Frazier’s vision, therefore, Thomas Jefferson’s idea of an agrarian republic would finally be achieved, only this time the movement would be led by those to whom the *Declaration of Independence* did not originally apply.<sup>162</sup>

Frazier’s blueprint, however, transcends issues of land and labor. Indeed, land owning was not all that was needed to usher the promises of Jubilee into reality. Frazier knew that he and his fellow freed people would also need to be integrated into the American state. As he saw it, something had to be done to bind the federal government to the freed people and vice versa. Hence, his insistence that freed people should “assist the government.” Helping the government, he believed, would engage both the freed people and the state into a system of reciprocal obligations. Black enlistment efforts served as the most apparent method of ensuring that both parties entered into such a relationship, but Frazier thought in terms far broader. He envisioned a scenario where men would “serve in such a manner as they may be wanted,” even if it meant eschewing arms for other types of governmental work. He specifically mentioned the possibility of freed men

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 314, 316.



going into the “Quartermaster’s or Commissary’s service.” Out of such work, he knew, would come greater respect, political and financial leverage, and, above all, a justifiable claim to real citizenship. His reasoning was simple. Linking freed people to the federal government through non-combative positions would effectively transform freed people into civil servants, thereby entitling them to the same reciprocal obligations granted to fighting men. Establishing a broad base of reciprocity between people and government, Frazier believed, was the foundation upon which all other provisions of citizenship rested. One of goals of the meeting, therefore, was to transform this inchoate sense of reciprocity into policy.

It would be a mistake, though, to attribute this blueprint to Frazier alone. When he spoke with Stanton he had the support of those other nineteen ministers, and it is likely that his answers were the collaborative byproducts of joint discussions amongst Savannah’s black leadership class. There also existed a grassroots element to his designs for a post-emancipation America. When questioned as to how representative his opinions were of those held by freed people across the region, Frazier explained that his sentiments were drawn from conversations he had with other freed people as a part of his ministry. Many of these men and women, he pointed out, were refugees. “My opinion is formed by personal communication in the course of my ministry,” he told Stanton, “and also from the thousands that followed the Union army, leaving their homes and undergoing suffering.” Their impact on Frazier and, undoubtedly, on the other ministers as well, was real. Not only did their suffering catch Frazier’s attention, but so, too, did their sheer numerical size. “I did not think there would be so many,” he explained, “the

number surpassed my expectation.” How much Frazier gleaned from the refugees before walking into his meeting with Sherman and Stanton will never be known. His response, however, proves that his blueprint for a post-emancipation America was not so much a top-down production, crafted by one sole leadership community, but a shared belief that emanated from below. Indeed, Frazier may have articulated the message, but he merely gave voice to an expectation held by those rendered voiceless.<sup>163</sup>

Sherman now had a solution. Four days later, after waiting for President Lincoln’s approval, he issued his Field Order No. 15, which outlined a plan whereby confiscated Confederate lands, stretching thirty miles inland from Charleston, South Carolina to the St. Johns River in Florida, would be redistributed to freed black families in forty acre plots. Military officials would direct the resettling process and provide the freed people both possessory land claims and access to necessities like seed, tools, and lumber. Sherman’s Field Order also stipulated that the only white people allowed on the lands would be military officials, which granted freed African Americans the autonomy to conduct their affairs as they wished. In March of the same year, Congress would establish the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, otherwise known as the Freedmen’s Bureau, to aid the freed people in their transition out of bondage. Actual freedom seemed to be at hand as the promises of the Levitical Jubilee were coming to fruition. Nothing less than a social revolution had hit the South Atlantic sea coast, and it

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 316.

sprung from one of the most unlikely of sources: the pen of General William T. Sherman.<sup>164</sup>

Sherman, however, did not intend his field order to be what historian Eric Foner has called the “blueprint for the transformation of Southern society.” Rather, his order, like his initial refugee policy, served a number of purposes. On one hand, dismembering large plantations and placing them exclusively in the hands of African American families punished the wealthy rice and cotton barons of the Low-country South, whom Sherman believed led the Southern states into war. On the other, he had already begun to envision his next move—a crushing thrust through the heart of the Carolinas. More refugees would most certainly fall in behind him just as they did in Georgia, and he resolved not to let it happen again. Thus the land encompassed in his field order provided an immediate sanctuary for both the thousands of refugees who followed his army to Savannah as well as those who would run to the army during the Carolina campaign. What neither the refugees, the Radical republicans, nor the military officials charged with overseeing settlement knew, however, was that Sherman conceived of his field order as only a temporary measure. The refugees were to only hold possessory claims to the land. Full legal title remained with the original land owners.<sup>165</sup>

The field order also assuaged Sherman’s critics. While in Savannah, questions once again arose over his treatment of the freed people. Henry Halleck informed him that

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<sup>164</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction, 1863-1877: America’s Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 70-72.

<sup>165</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 71.

a “certain class” of men who had a “great influence” with the president had been suggesting that he “manifested an almost criminal dislike to the negro.”<sup>166</sup> Those same men, Halleck explained, “say you [Sherman] might have brought with you to Savannah more than fifty thousand [Refugees], thus stripping Georgia of that number of laborers, and opening a road by which as many more could have escaped from their masters.” “But that, instead of this,” Halleck continued, “you drove them from your ranks, prevented their following you by cutting the bridges in your rear, and thus caused the massacre of large numbers by Wheeler’s cavalry.”<sup>167</sup> To this contention, Sherman responded sharply, “But the nigger? Why, in God’s name, can’t sensible men let him alone?” “Poor negro—Lo, the poor Indian!” he exclaimed, “Of course, some sensible men understand such humbug, but some power must be invested in our government to check these wild oscillations of public opinion.”<sup>168</sup> While there is no way of knowing whether or not he designed his field order with his own reputation in mind, it would be a mistake to assume that it did not factor into his decision at all. Settling thousands of former slaves on confiscated Confederate land would go a long way in ending what he called “that negro nonsense.”<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Letter from Henry Halleck to William T. Sherman, December 30, 1864 in *William T. Sherman, Memoirs of General William T. Sherman: By Himself* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1957), 247-48.

<sup>168</sup> Letters from Sherman to Henry Halleck, January 12, 1865 in Sherman Simpson, and Berlin, *Sherman’s Civil War*, 795-97.

<sup>169</sup> Letter from Sherman to Ellen Sherman January 15, 1865 in *Ibid.*, 797.

Sherman's order induced an immediate reaction. General Rufus Saxton convened a gathering at the Second African Baptist in the days following the order's release. The "large building" filled "to its utmost capacity" with freed men and women, who had gathered to understand the extent to which the order would impact their lives. As Charles Coffin, an army observer, noted, "it was the first meeting ever held in Savannah having in view the *exclusive* interests of the colored people (italics added)." Saxton conducted the meeting as one might expect given the circumstances and the setting. The organist ushered everyone to their seats, as would have been done for a Sunday service, and the choir broke out in song, singing patriotic hymns: "My country t' is of thee/ Sweet land of liberty/ Of thee I sing." When the music finished, General Saxton addressed the congregation. He spoke briefly about the war before "reading and explaining" Sherman's order. He then instructed the attendees to go to the islands, take possession of the abandoned lands, and encouraged the men to enlist in the army. "They were citizens," he told them, "and must begin to do their part as citizens."<sup>170</sup>

Saxton concluded his remarks and yielded the floor to Reverend Mansfield French, one of the leading white missionaries at Port Royal. French spoke on the what it meant to be a citizen, just as Saxton had done, and turned the floor over to U.L. Houston, a prominent minister in the city who had been among those present during the meeting with Sherman and Stanton. Houston delivered "an impassioned, fervent, and earnest" prayer, which included a "thanksgiving, a confession of sin, and a pleading for God's

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<sup>170</sup> Charles Coffin, *The Boys of '61 or Four Years of Fighting: Personal Observation with the Army and Navy, from the Battle of Bull Run to the Fall of Richmond* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1865), 420-21.

help.” He even “remembered” President Lincoln, Sherman’s army, the federal government, and asked that God would “bring the Rebels” to “lay down their arms and be at peace.” Following the prayer, the congregation began another classic hymn, which marked the conclusion of the service. The song was apparently an emotional one—a visceral confirmation that slavery had, indeed, been destroyed and that freedom had come at last. “Oh how gloriously the grand old choral of Luther rang!,” Coffin wrote. Old men, who “tottered on the verge of the grave,” sang in unison with women who “had toiled unrequited in the malicious rice swamps, who had prayed in dungeons and prisons, who had wept and prayed for their stolen babes,—for husbands, mangled and torn by bloodhounds.” As Coffin concluded, however, “all that was of the past,” for “The day of Jubilee had dawned.”<sup>171</sup>

In the days and months following the meeting at Second African Baptist, the freed people began to settle on the loamy plantations of the American Lowcountry. Some traveled north into South Carolina, while others traveled South, resettling on the plantations that dotted the Georgia coastline. Though many of these men and women had been long time residents of the Low-country, the refugees who followed Sherman’s army were undoubtedly scattered among them. Other freed people resettled in concert with other freed families, with the hopes of forming their own independent communities. Reverend U.L. Houston organized one such self-governing colony on Skidaway Island, roughly fifteen miles south of Savannah. Houston laid out plans for a village, replete with

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 421-22.

a church and a school house, and allotted forty-acre plots based upon numbers drawn from a hat. “It was Plymouth Colony repeating itself,” Charles Coffin reported, writing that “the Mayflower was blooming on the islands of the South Atlantic!”<sup>172</sup> Other colonies were established on Burnside, Ossabaw, St. Catherine’s, Sapelo, and Colonel’s Islands under the leadership of Tunis Campbell, a free African American from New Jersey who, since 1863, had been working with the Northern abolitionists and missionaries at Port Royal. Such movements were widespread, encroaching upon every inland plantation, every island, and every atoll along the coast. It was here in these communities that men and women transformed their post-emancipation dreams into a reality. Self-mastery could be expressed, property could be owned, and work could be done as one wished rather than as one was commanded. Likewise, the erratic verdicts of a whip, which a master flailed with the authority of a gavel, gave way to notions of equal justice under the law. The transformation of the American South was well under way, and nowhere was this transformation embodied more than in these island communities.<sup>173</sup>

Tragically, however, resettlement failed to make the impact freed men and women had envisioned. On the Good Friday evening of April, 14<sup>th</sup>, 1865, John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln at Ford’s theater in Washington, D.C, placing national leadership in the hands of Vice President Andrew Johnson. Soon after assuming office in April of 1865, Johnson began pardoning ex-Confederates and returning the

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 425; See also Foner, *Reconstruction*, 71.

<sup>173</sup> Russell Duncan, *Freedom’s Shore: Tunis Campbell and the Georgia Freedmen* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 20.

confiscated plantation lands to its original owners. The freed families who purchased their land at public auctions were safe, but those living on land granted them by Sherman's Field Order 15 were subject to removal once the original owner received his pardon and paid the appropriate tax. Saxton and Oliver O. Howard, one of Sherman's former generals who was now head of the Freedman's Bureau, fought Johnson's policies tooth and nail, but their efforts were to no avail. A radical program of land redistribution was not a part of Johnson's vision for a reconstruction grounded in white reconciliation rather than racial justice. Freed families were, therefore, pushed off their land and forced to start a new. Those refugees who swam across the icy waters of Ebenezer Creek, slept on the streets of Savannah, and experienced the elation of Sherman's Field Order No. 15, had done so only to be made refugees once more.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> See Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*.



## EPILOGUE

On January 31, 1865, the House of Representatives passed the Thirteenth Amendment. Nearly a year later, on December 6, 1865, the required number of states ratified the bill, writing it into law. Slavery, except as punishment for a crime, was dead. On June 18, 1865, as the Thirteenth Amendment awaited ratification, Congress agreed to the terms of a fourteenth amendment. According to this bill, citizenship would be granted to all people born or naturalized in the United States, and every such citizen would enjoy the rights to due process and equal protection under the law. Every southern state except Tennessee opposed the bill, which prolonged the contentious ratification process for three years. Finally, on July, 28, 1868, Secretary of State William Seward announced that three-fourths of the states had accepted the bill, making it operational. African Americans now possessed a legal claim to citizenship. Their freedom was guaranteed by the rule of law.<sup>175</sup>

As the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments were being ratified, ex-confederates returned to the sea islands of the South Atlantic coastline. Their revolution,

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<sup>175</sup> See Michael Vorenburg, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Garrett Epps, *Democracy Reborn: The Fourteenth Amendment and the Fight for Equal Rights in Post-Civil War America* (New York: Macmillan, 2006).

they realized, had spawned a revolution of different sorts. Former enslaved men and women now lived as freed people on land they had once been bound to; some even claimed ownership of it. The ex-confederates found this new social arrangement untenable. They demanded that their land be returned and desired to see the freed people re-bound to the land so as to regain control over black labor.

The Johnson administration obliged them. In September of 1865, after spending much of the summer pardoning ex-confederates, Johnson ordered that land previously owned by pardoned confederates should be restored, leaving only those tracts of land sold outright at public auctions in the hands of freed people. Some forty thousand freed men and women were told to either sign labor contracts with the planters or leave. Those who signed contracts signed away much of their freedom to move, lost the ability to regulate their own labor, and opened themselves up to the never ending accrual of debt, for the labor arrangements were typically either unfair, illegal, or the work of a sleight of hand. Those who refused to contractually obligate themselves to a planter were displaced once more, forming, for all intents and purposes, an itinerant peasantry. By the winter of 1865, however, the Freedmen's Bureau, the agency tasked with overseeing settlement, reversed course. With no alternative but to acquiesce to the president's orders, the Bureau began persuading African Americans to sign what contracts they could. Those who refused to initially sign on were thus made to either find work or suffer the consequences. Though some held fast, managing to stall certain land restorations through legal battles that lasted

into 1870s, Sherman's field order had been all but undermined. The dream of jubilee, the goal for which Georgia's refugees strove, had come to disappointing end.<sup>176</sup>

Johnson's decision to abrogate Sherman's field order marked the beginning of a new chapter for the freed people living in the American Lowcountry. During the war and its immediate aftermath, the goal was to obtain freedom, then legitimate it in as many ways as possible. Running away, serving in the army, assisting the army, owning land, and becoming literate were thus all part of the same process. Following Johnson's revocation of Sherman's field order, however, circumstances changed. The federal government, the powerful entity that authorized their freedom, had not only shown an unwillingness to defend them, but seemed fallible in the face of Southern white recalcitrance. Resistance, therefore, became the only means by which freed people could legitimize their freedom. The objective now, in short, was not to further expand their freedoms but to simply hold on to the gains emancipation had wrought. What remnants of jubilee remained had to be preserved.

Should this project be expanded, it would probe deeper into this new chapter and address two inter-related issues. The first, far broader issue is one of policy and actuality, individuals and institutions. The Fourteenth Amendment, for example, ostensibly guaranteed black freedom by granting African Americans civil rights. The amendment was backed by the power of the government and enforced by institutions like the US army, the Freedman's Bureau, and the federal court system. Such power, however, is

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<sup>176</sup> See Foner, *Reconstruction*, 156-61; Claude F. Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedman's Bureau and Black Landownership* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 46-71.

derived, in part, from a people's willingness to concede to the institutions that wielded it. Therein lies the problem. Ex-confederates never conceded. They refused to accept the consequences of the war and sought to undermine the institutions designed to transform Southern society. Congress, therefore, could pass landmark pieces of legislation like the Fourteenth Amendment, only to have it achieve little actual results on the ground. This discrepancy pervaded the post-emancipation South and explains why Reconstruction became a revolution that went unfinished.<sup>177</sup>

The other, more specific issue centers on black labor. During the war and in its wake, freed people believed that land ownership held the key to independence. From just a small parcel of soil, families could reconstitute themselves, regulate their own work routines, and enjoy the fruits of their labor. Above all, however, land ownership provided a means of validating their citizenship. It was a form of capital that possessed personal as well as financial solvency. Without the means to own land, freed people had to start from square one, which meant building their lives around another form of capital: their labor. How one would work, when one would work, and for how long one would work thus became the salient questions of Reconstruction. Amidst these negotiations, a strain of labor radicalism emerged. Black men and women across the region demanded greater control over their labor, which both heightened the impulse to resist and informed the methods of their resistance. These demands, however, doubled as disputes over

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<sup>177</sup> This issue is highlighted in Eric McKittrick's *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction*. See Eric McKittrick, *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). It also often appears in discussion of enforcement. See Greg Downs, *After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015) and Richard Zuczek. *State of Rebellion: Reconstruction in South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

something much more than labor. They embodied larger contests over what freedom should mean, how far it should reach, and who should set its boundaries.

Georgia's refugees were ultimately integrated into freed communities all along the coast. Their experiences merged with those of thousands of other freed people almost to the point of being indistinguishable. Their refugee experience, however, remains unique in the history of the war and, consequently, unique in the history of emancipation. The journey from Georgia's interior to the coast posed challenges as well as threats, but, most of all, it placed the refugees in a position to transform their vision of a post-war America into a reality. Indeed, on those dusty roads, Georgia's refugees stood on the vanguard of freedom and toed the brink of black citizenship. The experience of being a refugee informed how they conceived of these notions and often determined the means by which they would bring them to fruition. As freed men and women moved into this next chapter, Georgia's refugees would once again find themselves at the forefront of freedom as those same experiences would continue to inform how African American men and women confronted the challenges of Reconstruction.

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