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Emancipation in Tennessee

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Abstract

The Civil War that started 150 years ago in the United States became a revolution that shook the whole of American society because it did not end just as a civil war, but became a war to emancipate slaves. Because the number of slaves emancipated by the Civil War amounted to two-thirds of all the slaves freed throughout the nineteenth century, it had global significance as well.

The war, however, had begun to preserve the Union, not to emancipate slaves. The conducts of slaves, who were motivated by their deep conviction that it was a war for their freedom, played a pivotal role in changing a civil war into a political and social revolution.

This article examines how a civil war among white people became a war for the freedom of slaves, focusing on Tennessee, the only Confederate state whose entire state was exempted from Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Because of the exemption from the Proclamation, the *de facto* end of slavery did not assure *de jure* freedom for individual slaves in Tennessee.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the conduct of the slaves as guides, informants, and laborers for Union officers and soldiers was the driving force for changes in the federal acts related to slaves. While initial measures, such as the exclusion policy and the First Confiscation Act of 1861, exhibited the inclination of the federal government to regard slaves as property, such later measures as the Militia Act of 1862 and a resolution to encourage black enlistment of 1863 acknowledged that slaves were human beings with families.

Once black people became legally as free as white people, however, how to realize equality among its populace became a mission of American society. Afro-Americans' fight for freedom during the war, and for equality after the abolition of slavery, did invaluable service to making American society a step closer to its ideal democracy.

In the summer of 1865, Jourdon Anderson of Ohio answered a letter from his former master, Colonel P. H. Anderson of Middle Tennessee, asking him to return to Tennessee in order to work for him. After explaining to the colonel that he was now earning twenty-five dollars a month, that his wife was now known as Mrs. Anderson, and that his children were receiving good education at school, Anderson requested “eleven thousand six hundred and eighty dollars as payment for all the labor Anderson and his wife had performed in slavery” – kindly inviting the colonel to deduct doctor’s bills from that amount. He then inquired if there were any schools for Afro-American children in the neighborhood, because education of his children to develop “virtuous habits” was his “greatest desire.” He warned Colonel Anderson that “there would be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the laborer of his hire” and dismissed the colonel’s promise to free him should he return, remarking that he had already obtained freedom from the “Provost-Marshal-General of the Department of Nashville.”¹

What great satisfaction it must have been for a slave to confront his former master in such a manner. It is clear from his letter that slaves understood slavery to be an injustice, dismissing the idea that inferiority destined them to be slaves for life. By the same token, what a shock it must have been for white Southerners to go through such radical changes as the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution following the demise of slavery. They had never dreamed of a world without slavery, since it had organized Southern society for two centuries. Surprised also were the federal government and many Northerners who entered the Civil War without a concrete vision for the post-slavery South.

The Civil War that started 150 years ago proved to be a revolution that shook the whole of American society precisely because it did not end just as a civil war but became a war to free slaves. What was more, because the number of slaves emancipated by the Civil War amounted to two-thirds of all the slaves freed throughout the nineteenth century, it also had global significance.² It is important to keep in mind, however, that the war had begun to preserve the Union, not to emancipate slaves, but changed its course in large part because of slaves’ actions. Slaves were motivated by their deep conviction that it was a war for their freedom. At the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Civil War, it might be meaningful to reaffirm that slaves’ conducts played a pivotal role in

transforming a civil war into a political and social revolution.

Although this article examines how a civil war among white people became a war for the freedom of slaves, it does not chronicle every pattern of slaves' actions repeated in many slave states from the outbreak of the war through Reconstruction. As Ira Berlin makes clear in his *Generations of Captivity*, Tennessee resembled other states in that in their actions slaves “drew upon their understanding of the right from the wrong of slavery.”³ Among others, however, I would like to emphasize the importance of the political outlook slaves had developed over the years. Slaves in the United States are known for the rarity of slave insurrections and, in fact, did not respond to John Brown's attempted uprising, perhaps for a good reason, given the majority of white people over slaves.⁴ They, however, acted almost in concert only in the event of the Civil War, and it was because of their accurate analysis of American politics. Of course, it does not apply to all the slaves, but primary sources indicate that slaves and free black people in leadership positions made a sensible decision to act in accordance with the progress of the war. Even without active political participation through ballot, black people had developed a political outlook during slavery by which they chose the right conduct at the right moment.⁵

By contrast, white Southerners and white Northerners, up to a certain point of time, failed to swim the tide; the current of the world was the abolition of slavery. Tennessee slaves contemplated the prospect of freedom with joy, while most white Tennesseans contemplated it with dread. In one sense, slaves were better prepared for freedom than white Tennesseans because their thoughts had dwelt on it forever. In another sense, however, slaves were not well prepared for freedom because slavery had not provided them with capital and education. That difference in outlook and preparedness contributed to elevating a white men's civil war to a revolution.

1 . Tennessee

Why did I choose Tennessee? Tennessee's significant impact upon the entire country as well as the South during the period of secession through Reconstruction gives us multifaceted angles to investigate political changes happening in the United States. Tennessee's population – 1,109,714 – was the fourth largest in the South on the eve of the Civil War, although it had

the smallest slave population in the Confederacy in percentage terms (24.8 percent). The state had both plantation and non-plantation regions as well as secessionist and Unionist sections.⁶ In 1859 Tennessee was the eighth largest cotton producer in the country, the second in swine, the third in tobacco and corn, and the fourth in wheat. “No other state ranked as high in so many different agricultural goods [as Tennessee].” But agricultural products were not the only commodities Tennesseans traded. Located at the intermediary stage in the interstate slave trade, numerous slaves, slave-traders, and slave-catchers traversed Tennessee.⁷ River transportation through the Mississippi, Tennessee, and Cumberland and an extensive railroad system linked the state to both the North and the South.⁸ These attributes – foodstuffs, livestock, cotton, and transportation by rail and river – made Tennessee key to fighting the war and strategically crucial for both contending armies.

Tennessee’s complex external geography – bordered by six Confederate states and two Union states – underlined its strategic importance. Following events in the United States from a distance, Karl Marx predicted that “no Southern republic is capable of living without the possession of Tennessee.” Bearing out his prediction, both Union and Confederate forces strove to occupy the state from the onset of the war. Tennessee hosted the second largest number of Civil War battles, after Virginia. Invasion and occupation by both armies devastated a fertile land and led perceptive Tennesseans to conclude that slavery was gone as early as 1863.⁹

Tennessee’s complex external geography was compounded by an internal division into three sections: east, middle, and west. East Tennessee was the least reliant upon slave labor, Middle Tennessee owed its prosperity to diversified agriculture based upon slave labor, and West Tennessee was an unambiguously part of the cotton kingdom. Despite Tennessee’s extensive railroads to the outside, there were no railroads linking the states’ three regions to each other. Tennesseans as a whole were proud of the two men they had sent to the White House by 1860, Andrew Jackson and James Polk. During the secession crisis, however, differing degrees of integration into the slave economy brought about differing degrees of allegiance to the Union and Confederacy: commitment to secession in West Tennessee, divided-allegiance in Middle Tennessee, and Unionism in East Tennessee. If secession united the Lower South, it produced internal discord in Tennessee, and the state’s disunity exposed the weakness of

the whole Confederacy.¹⁰

While it has been well known that the Confederacy lost the war partly because it was not firmly united, Tennessee was the most reluctant rebel of all the Confederate states and proved to be the Achilles' heel of the Confederacy.¹¹ That in turn indicates the importance of the state to the federal government, as evident in Abraham Lincoln's choice of Andrew Johnson of Tennessee as his running mate for his second presidential election. Furthermore, Lincoln's solicitude for the numerous Unionist Tennesseans prompted him to exempt the entire state from the final Emancipation Proclamation. Thus, the de facto end of slavery did not bring de jure freedom for individual slaves. Until the state constitution abolished slavery on 22 February 1865, exemption from the Emancipation Proclamation limited freedom to those slaves who enlisted in the Union army and those who were able to prove the disloyalty of their owners.

2. The Confederacy and Slavery: the demise of slavery from inside

As were true of slaves everywhere, slaves in Tennessee sought spiritual nourishment in their dreams to be free some day and were ever watchful for a chance to arrive. Slaves, therefore, had keen interest in white men's politics and were surprisingly knowledgeable about it.¹² But the year 1860 was special to them. A slave coachman of Middle Tennessee, whose job had been to take his master to Nashville to get political news, noticed that during the "exciting times" of the presidential campaign, his master took the mail himself, which "seemed to be much larger than usual." Discussion among slaves was especially intense; they met at night and discussed "the events and progress of the Lincoln campaign." Judging by "the many duels fought" between Democrats and Republicans, slaves concluded that white Tennesseans were not of one mind. They knew that the election of Abraham Lincoln would mean a civil war.¹³ A sermon preached to slaves on one West Tennessee plantation instructing them to "Obey your mistress, be good servants, pray to the Lord not to let slaves gain their freedom, and that the Yankees won't gain the victory" must have accomplished the opposite of the preacher's intention, informing the slaves of freedom coming through Union victory.¹⁴

It was, however, the Confederacy and its auxiliaries that first weakened

the slaveholders' monopoly of power. In fact, slavery began to crumble inside the Confederacy even before the Union invasion. Many planters in West Tennessee received a number of reminders of dual warfare: a fight against the Union and a fight to control their own slaves.¹⁵ After Fort Sumter, in response to an increasing number of slave insurrection rumors in various places of the state, white Tennesseans took up arms to protect themselves from slaves, rather than fighting against Union soldiers. Regardless of the authenticity of the rumors, it meant not only that white Tennesseans could not concentrate on fighting Union soldiers but also that white Tennesseans no longer had full control over slaves.¹⁶

Some were even willing to emancipate their own slaves. General Nathan Bedford Forrest, who would later become a leader of the Ku Klux Klan, announced to his slaves that should they accompany and remain loyal to him, they would be freed regardless of the existence of slavery. Forty-five of his slaves responded to his call and gained freedom before the end of the war.¹⁷ In Memphis in September 1861, several hundred slaves armed with "shovels, axes, and blankets" marched through the city "shouting for Jeff Davis and singing war songs" under Confederate officers.¹⁸ All these incidents clearly showed that the power of slaveholders was no longer invincible, for such an institution as the Confederate States of America came to interfere with a personal relationship between slaveholders and slaves, which had been the foundation of the slavery system in the South.

Nevertheless, the number of slaves emancipated by those means was not large, and most of the slaveholders strove to keep slavery intact. After joining the Confederacy on 8 June 1861, the state government of Tennessee requested slaveholders to deliver their slaves in order to construct fortifications. Although it was to protect the Confederacy from Union attacks, slaveholders were so reluctant to cooperate that it deepened a split between the state government and slaveholders. A conflict between the Confederate government and slaveholders over slaves caused a serious consequence.

In February 1862, Nashville became the first state capital in the Confederacy that fell under Union control, following General Ulysses S. Grant's capture of Forts Henry and Donelson. The fault partly lay in the reluctance of slaveholders to offer the labor of their slaves for the construction of forts.¹⁹ Confederate officers in Middle Tennessee repeatedly experienced

difficulty in obtaining slave labor. As of 6 December 1861, only seven slaves out of the desired 300 had reported for duty at nearby Cockrill's Hill, and still fewer in Nashville.²⁰ Slaveholders were so uncooperative that the governor had to issue an appeal to the citizens of Nashville in mid-December 1861 assuring them that the care of slaves would be "satisfactory to the owners," that the slaves would be placed in the charge of persons known in the region from which the slaves came, and that one dollar per day for each slave would be paid to owners in case subsistence was furnished by owners.²¹ However, the response to the appeal was not "flattering," and those slaves gathered for the fortification of the Confederacy, not surprisingly, worked half-heartedly.

General Grant was determined to take the two forts for both strategic reasons and a "moral effect" on the federal soldiers advancing toward enemy territory. In early February 1862 he took both forts, and President Lincoln promoted him to major general. The morale of Union soldiers and the public confidence of the North in their armies soared.²² Soon after Union capture of Forts Henry and Donelson, the Confederate forces evacuated Nashville.²³

The fall of Nashville forced white Tennesseans to face the incompatibility of their goals: while they wanted slavery untouched, it was impossible to fight the war without using slave labor. It also taught slaves that there might be a chance to be free by taking advantage of a cleavage between the Confederate government and slaveholders. Once Nashville was occupied by the Union, it was impossible to stop the tide of slaves fleeing from nearby plantations. It was, therefore, the Confederacy itself that contributed to the loss of Nashville and to the weakening of slavery.

3. The Union army and slaves

Slaves quickly reacted to the fall of Nashville as well as Forts Henry and Donelson. One slave went from house to house to tell the news, emphasizing "how bad it was" that the Confederacy was defeated, but "secretly rejoicing" at the Union's success.²⁴ A large number of slaves fled to Nashville from various sections of the state and Kentucky. A slave from Kentucky remembered that many female slaves went to Fort Donelson to cook.²⁵ To the dismay of white Tennesseans, the state legislature also fled from Nashville to Memphis upon the fall of Fort Donelson, with the governor warning the people of the city, "Every

man must now take care of himself; I am going to take care of myself. Flee.”²⁶

Fugitive slaves who fled to Union lines were also disappointed. General Grant reiterated to his subordinates General Henry Halleck's policy of excluding fugitive slaves from Union lines and instructed officers to keep out fugitives. At the same time, the First Confiscation Act of 1861, which provided that slaves who had been employed in support of the rebellion were subjects of prize and capture, allowed federal officers to seize them.²⁷ As a result, those slaves who had labored for the construction of Forts Henry and Donelson were confiscated and could entertain a possibility of freedom, or at least they were not under the reign of slaveholders. By contrast, General Don Carlos Buell assured slaveholding Kentuckians that in every case he allowed masters to recover their hands.²⁸

Some Union officers, however, found it “repugnant” to return slaves to their masters. For instance, General Ormsby Mitchell on the riverfront of the Tennessee found slaves his “only friends” and was saved twice by “their faithfulness.” He proposed “the absolute necessity of protecting slaves who furnish us valuable information.” Secretary of State Edwin M. Stanton agreed and regarded it as “a high Duty” in the fight against the Confederacy.²⁹

It was inevitable that slavery, which had been already weakened within the Confederacy, continued to weaken by the Union occupation. The federal government, for its part, found it impossible to sustain the policy of non-interference with slavery. By fleeing from plantations en masse and staying in Union camps, slaves forced the federal government in Washington, through field officers in Tennessee, to deal with the treatment of slaves. It certainly strengthened the power of the federal government, which paved a way for a more unified nation. It stood in total contrast to the Confederacy where individual states remained strong over the central government.³⁰

Fugitive slaves soon became an issue the federal government could not avoid. The status of the slaves of loyal masters remained especially precarious until the federal Congress enacted an additional article of war on 13 March 1862. This new act forbade Union soldiers to return slaves to their masters, although it did not prevent them from “opening their camps to slaveholders” as long as soldiers did not assist the capture.³¹ Even though it did not confer freedom, the act was a step forward for Tennessee's slaves, because the prohibition against recapturing slaves did not depend upon the disloyalty of

owners for a slave to receive refuge.

Fugitive slaves, by their conduct as guides, informants, and laborers, let Union officers and soldiers recognize their value. By issuing piecemeal acts related to slaves in response to the requests and questions raised by field officers, federal officers gradually became liberators. The initial policy of returning fugitive slaves to their owners was changed by the First Confiscation Act in August 1861, which, however limited, denied the absolute power of slaveholders over slaves by confiscating those slaves who had worked for the Confederacy. Four months after the additional act of March 1862, the Second Confiscation Act went so far as liberating those slaves whose owners were disloyal to the federal government.

The Militia Act of July 1862 went even further; it freed not only slaves who had labored for the Union but their family members as well. “This was a remarkable acknowledgment that slaves *had* families,” in the words of Eric Foner.³² The Fort Pillow Massacre of 1864 in Tennessee, where approximately two hundred black soldiers were massacred after they had surrendered, prompted the federal government to entitle an ex-slave woman to a pension, provided that she and the deceased soldier had been habitually recognized as man and wife.³³ “A Resolution to encourage Enlistment and to promote the Efficiency of the military Forces of the United States” enacted on 3 March 1865 defined those women who cohabited with soldiers at the time of enlistment as wives. While it was, of course, the federal government that enacted these measures, it is important to keep in mind that the driving force of those acts was the conduct of slaves themselves.³⁴

It is well known that prior to the war, such leaders as President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of State William Seward had thought of slavery as an obstacle to America’s becoming a great country. They also predicted the significant impact of the Civil War on the progress of democracy and civilization of the world.³⁵ Yet, they did not start the war to abolish slavery. In fact, a series of these laws did not have a strong will to abolish a system of slavery at one stroke. Rather, by confiscating slaves of disloyal masters alone and respecting the slaves of loyal masters as their property, the federal government encouraged slaveholders to support the Union if they wished to keep their slaves. In this sense, they were the same kind of war measures as the Emancipation Proclamation. At the same time, these acts naturally taught

slaves what to say when questioned about the loyalty of their owners.

What seemed important to white Tennesseans was one's loyalty to the government, the Union or the Confederacy. Black Tennesseans, however, had understood that the crux of the matter was slavery. A white East Tennessean asked a black man where he stood on this war. He replied, "Massa, did you ever see two dogs fightin' over a bone? Did you ever see de bone fight? I'se de bone." He not only evaded a question but also showed his good grasp of the cause of the Civil War.³⁶ What is insightful of his remark was that not only the Confederacy but also the federal government considered slaves as a bone, that is, a "thing." The official name of fugitive slaves as "contrabands," coined in the summer of 1861 by General Benjamin Butler, is a clear example. No matter how much President Lincoln might have wished in his heart to destroy slavery, he found it wrong and impolitic to ignore a constitutional right to hold property. Lincoln was too much a politician to upset the four border states, which did not secede from the Union, and Unionist sections of the Confederacy, like East Tennessee, by letting the public suspect that the war was about slavery.³⁷

At the same time, changes in the description of fugitive slaves are revelation of how the federal government came to acknowledge the fact that fugitive slaves were persons with families. While the First Confiscation Act identified them as "property," the additional article of war used the term "fugitives," the Second Confiscation Act, "slaves," and the Militia Act of 1862 acknowledged them as "persons of African descent." It indicates that as the war progressed with more and more slaves coming to Union lines, the federal government found it wrong and inconvenient not to treat slaves as people, even though "of African descent."³⁸

Earlier laws of the federal government dealing with fugitive slaves, such as the exclusion policy and the First Confiscation Act, exhibited the inclination of the government to regard slaves as property, rather than humanitarian considerations to them. It was slaves themselves, by their flight from plantations and invaluable assistance they offered to the Union, who helped the federal government accept that they, too, were human beings capable of helping the Union's war effort and that the Union could gain the whole lot by transforming a civil war into the fight for freedom. The greatest achievement of slaves lies in this point.

Based on their political analysis and the simple logic that their foes must be their friends, slaves believed that the Union victory would bring them freedom and, therefore, cooperated with the Union forces in beating the Confederacy. But they fought for their own freedom, not necessarily out of a desire for vengeance upon white Tennesseans. Slaveholders, however, regarded enlistment of slaves for the Union army as the worst act of personal betrayal. When a slave came back to see his mistress after the Battle of Nashville, she asked him if he had forgotten the care and kindness he had received from her. When he replied that he had not, the mistress retorted angrily, “And now you are fighting me!” The slave responded, “No’m, I ain’t fighting you, I’m fighting to get free.”³⁹ Many slaves in other states fought for the same reason. The future was more important to slaves, whereas slaveholders could not get away from the past.

Encouraged by the victory at Nashville, Union forces succeeded in controlling Memphis in June 1862. Because of its proximity to the cotton plantations along the Mississippi riverfront, a large number of slaves rushed to Memphis from nearby plantations. Lest they interfere with the Union’s military advance, General Grant planned to send to Illinois women and children of fugitive slaves, who kept coming to the camp. But they could go nowhere because of opposition from people in Illinois. Cotton was ripe in plantations where plantation owners were absent, and the federal government could earn money by selling cotton. To solve all these problems at a stroke, free labor was introduced to the Mississippi Valley region in the fall of 1862 under the supervision of the federal government. Although free labor had already been instituted experimentally in Port Royal, South Carolina, it was first along the Mississippi Valley where a large number of fugitive slaves experienced free labor in a systematic manner and in such extensive areas.

It was an important step forward toward freedom, but their first free labor was free only by name, as many slaves felt it was like slavery under different masters. What compounded the problem further was that field officers did not know who should receive payment for their labor. Although it was a free labor system, the laborers’ wages could go to their owners if they turned out to be loyal to the Union because laborers were still legally slaves.⁴⁰ Slaves, therefore, did not feel entirely free in their experience of free labor. Nonetheless, they gradually began to feel dignity as human beings by attending schools and marriage ceremonies conducted in Union camps. They were delighted even to

be taxed in order to help the less fortunate. In short, they regarded it as proof of their liberty to do such things as white Tennesseans normally did.⁴¹

4. The year 1863 as a turning point for slaves

The Union's seizure in 1862 of Memphis, the center of cotton trade and river transportation, and Nashville, a breadbasket for the whole country, turned the war's fortune in their favor. The year 1863 marked the dawn of emancipation through President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Contrary to what he had expected, however, the Unionists in Tennessee, on whose behalf he took the trouble of exempting the whole state from his final proclamation, turned secessionists upon hearing the news.⁴² Those Unionists, who had trusted that the federal government would never touch slavery, regarded the survival of slavery in Tennessee alone as meaningless. Unionists in Tennessee can be divided into four categories: 1) those who remained Unionists up to the time of the attack on Fort Sumter on 12 April 1861; 2) those who continued to support the Union until President Lincoln's call for troops on 19 April 1861 – the majority falls into this category; 3) those who remained loyal until Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on 1 January 1863, like congressman Emerson Etheridge of West Tennessee; 4) unconditional Unionists, such as Andrew Johnson and William G. Brownlow of East Tennessee, who remained Unionists throughout the war and had asked President Lincoln to exempt their state from the final proclamation. All the Unionists, probably except for the fourth category, felt betrayed by the proclamation because their allegiance to the Union originated from their belief that a right to hold property would be better protected under the federal constitution than under the Confederacy.⁴³ Slaveholding women in Nashville "were as restive as their negroes" and talked of the proclamation "pitifully," because they could not bear the thought of doing the household chores themselves.⁴⁴

By contrast, even before it was proclaimed, slaves in Nashville had talked of nothing but the proclamation and very eloquently expressed their dreams for the days after slavery. "Oh, my heart almos' jumped out of me for joy," a female slave of La Grange, West Tennessee, recalled of the arrival of Yankees, to whom she explained in the presence of her master how he mistreated her.⁴⁵

Another slave who had been purchasing her freedom felt relieved that she no longer had to pay. “De rest ain’t paid yet. No, sah! Leave dat to de judgment-day.”⁴⁶ Once Union forces became decidedly the liberators in the eyes of slaves, it became more and more difficult to stop them from leaving their plantations for Union camps. Having heard of the proclamation, many slaves left their plantations to board Union gunboats on the Mississippi River and surprised the federal officers with the amount of information they had, especially that they were to be free on 1 January 1863.⁴⁷ Increased numbers of fugitive slaves hastened the deterioration of slavery.

Although the Emancipation Proclamation freed no slaves in Tennessee, the effect of the clear association between the war and the emancipation of slaves by the federal government was visible in the state. While the exemption of Tennessee from the Proclamation cast “[t]he shadow on the hearts of those creatures...darker than the skin which God gave them,” slaves began using the term “freedmen” rather than “contrabands” after 1 January 1863. Furthermore, even though slaves in Tennessee became legally free on 22 February 1865 by the act of the state, slaves decided to celebrate 1 January 1863 as the day of liberation because they understood that Lincoln’s proclamation played a role in encouraging the process of emancipation.⁴⁸

While it changed the outlook of slaves, the Emancipation Proclamation did nothing to help Union officers solve “a most perplexing” problem of fugitive slaves. An officer at La Grange was at a loss for what to do with the ever increasing number of slaves running from loyal slaveholders in Tennessee whom the proclamation did not affect.⁴⁹ As a commander at Memphis observed, although the state was exempt from the proclamation, “the Military authorities both from choice and under orders ignore the condition of slavery.”⁵⁰ The subject of loyalty and the state’s exemption from the proclamation would later produce much confusion about the timing of free status for individual slaves as well as the commodities produced by slave labor in Tennessee.⁵¹

The Union victory at Vicksburg, Mississippi, on 4 July 1863 “sealed” the fate of the Confederacy in the judgment of General Grant, bringing more land and slaves to the Union as well as a long Mississippi riverfront to garrison. The Department of Cumberland alone employed as many as 11,000 black laborers – more than one-fifth of all military-aged (18-45 years old) black Tennesseans – as teamsters and laborers to accommodate the armies

on the move. They repaired and built roads, rails, and bridges, chopped wood, and drove wagons and livestock.⁵² Afro-Tennesseans played a central role in protecting the extensive line of abandoned plantations and contraband camps along the river. After describing the danger and terrors of battlefield, Captain Asa S. Fiske asked if anyone was willing to take the risk of becoming a soldier. All “as one man” responded in the affirmative.⁵³

In the third year of the war, enlistment of black soldiers for the Union began in Tennessee. In March 1863, President Lincoln unsuccessfully encouraged Andrew Johnson, a military governor of the state, to enlist slaves, emphasizing the point that Johnson was an important slaveholder from a slave state. Johnson, however, regarded the recruitment of slaves as “improper and injurious” to his attempt to reconstruct the state for the Union and insisted that the subject “should be handled with care,” even though he must have read a number of earnest petitions sent by Tennesseans and Northerners for a commission to raise a black regiment.⁵⁴ On 25 March 1863 Secretary of War Edwin Stanton ordered Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas to investigate local conditions along the Mississippi Valley for the enlistment of black people. Soon recognizing that arming fugitive slave men would make the most of available resources and that they could also protect soldiers’ families on plantations, Thomas instituted the first systematic program by which free labor, enlistment of black soldiers, and emancipation became an integrated policy. Under his Special Orders No. 45, issued on 18 August 1863 enlistment of Afro-American men took full effect in West Tennessee.⁵⁵

In addition to West Tennessee, Major General George L. Stearns arrived at Nashville, Middle Tennessee, in September 1863, for the purpose of recruitment. Because arming slaves was one of the goals of the abolitionists, private money collected in Boston defrayed much of the cost of recruiting in Tennessee. Major Stearns found that black people volunteered “so freely” that he decided to raise more regiments than he had originally planned. Unless their owners were disloyal to the federal government, enlistment was the only way to be free for slaves in Tennessee, because they were excluded from the Emancipation Proclamation. Stearns also received “numerous applications” by planters to take their slaves because they were “a nuisance,” an indication of the slaveholders’ lost hegemony.⁵⁶ When recruiting stations were opened at Clarksville and Gallatin on the Kentucky border, a large number of slaves in

Kentucky ran from their owners, some coming from as far away as Louisville, to enlist.⁵⁷ It was certainly a blow to Kentucky's slavery. In the end, over 20,000 black men were credited to Tennessee, the second largest in the number of soldiers, following Louisiana, as well as the highest in the percentage (39 percent) of enlisted men among all men of the military age within the eleven Confederate states. This strong commitment gave Afro-Tennesseans much pride and a sense of entitlement to full citizenship.⁵⁸

Union officers stressed the special assets black soldiers would bring to the army. In addition to the advantages they generally had over white soldiers, such as their firm determination to be free and to uplift their brethren and their freshness in mind and body compared to the white soldiers who had been on the battleground for the last two years, General Thomas's contact with black people of the Mississippi Valley area awoke him to others: obedience to orders, as a result of slavery; religiousness; musicality, which made them apt at marching; and cleanliness. He rated them "the most important addition" to Union armies and requested a pay increase on their behalf.⁵⁹ In Middle Tennessee, Colonel Thomas J. Morgan discovered that black soldiers from the South had another advantage over Northern black recruits. Many of them had already experienced the war as servants and military laborers. In examining recruits at Gallatin in November 1863, Morgan met many black men who understood clearly what they needed to do and what they might expect.⁶⁰

Nothing signified the changed status of black men from slaves to liberators more than enlistment, an effect noticeable even before black soldiers went to a battlefield. In Union-occupied areas where a pass system was instituted, the "proud southern slaveholders" had to be escorted by Afro-American soldiers who had been slaves a few months ago. It deeply humiliated masters, but afforded slaves a great deal of self-esteem and a sense of dignity they had never experienced in bondage.⁶¹ "[N]o man here pretends to control his slaves," as Stearns reported in March 1864. Black enlistment completed the destruction of slavery in Tennessee which had been underway since the beginning of the war.⁶² Aware of this drastic change in the status of black men, slaves on the plantation also became more and more insolent from the slaveholders' point of view; they stopped working for slaveholders and began working for themselves.⁶³

Slaves were not alone in appreciating the diminished power of the

slaveholding class. The participation of local white Tennesseans in acts of theft and robbery, which were often committed by slaves with active or tacit support from Union soldiers, caused total chaos in West and Middle Tennessee.⁶⁴ During her sojourn in the summer of 1863 at Beersheba Spring, Grundy County, Bettie Ridley Blackmore was taken aback to witness the “extremely poor – ignorant and envious” local white Tennesseans pillaging cottages owned by affluent Tennesseans. Some of the fine libraries in possession of the well-to-do were “taken by those ignorant creatures that cannot read.”⁶⁵ As if freed slaves loosened the knots of social fabric, the demise of slavery was visible in a sudden change in the behavior of the non-slaveholding class, and it was as shocking to slaveholders as that of slaves.

5. Freedom and Equality

Prompted by such a drastic event as the enlistment of Afro-Americans, black Tennesseans sensed the impending day of jubilee and wasted no time in laying the groundwork for freedom. For the first time a group of black Tennesseans of Nashville held a meeting on 4 July 1863 – that itself was remarkable because they were still legally slaves prohibited from gathering – where a slave read the Declaration of Independence and asserted black people’s right to liberty.⁶⁶ In November 1864, the time of the presidential election, prominent black men of Nashville installed a mock polling place where over 3,000 votes were cast for the Union Party.⁶⁷ Political activities of Afro-Tennesseans were not confined to Tennessee. They not only sent delegates to the National Convention of Colored Citizens of the United States held in Syracuse, New York, in 1864, but the number of Tennessee delegates to the First Annual Meeting of the National Equal Rights League assembled in 1865 was the largest among the former Confederate states.⁶⁸ Facing the contrast of desolate plantations and flourishing activities among black Tennesseans, a group of slaveholders wrote, as early as the fall of 1863, from Nashville to the Secretary of War that the demise of slavery in Tennessee was “an accomplished and immutable fact.”⁶⁹

Between the time close to the end of the war and immediate postwar years, Afro-Tennesseans frequently held meetings in various locations of the state, and not only black men and women but Union officers also participated

in these events. Regardless of participants and places, certain themes were in common among all these meetings. While expressing gratitude to the federal government, black Tennesseans emphasized that the abolition of slavery alone would not constitute freedom. “[F]reedom is the natural right of all men,” they declared and explained further that they had been wrongly deprived of that right by no fault of their own. They pointed out that it had taken two hundred years to bring Americans to a “sense of justice.” Black Tennesseans had encouraged their brethren to enlist for the Union, but it was intended only as a demonstration of their worthiness and capability. They believed in the principle of birthright citizenship.⁷⁰

They regarded the acquisition of free status as a start, rather than the goal of their struggle, and were anxious to prove their capability and worthiness to the world. From their frequent reference to the world, black people were keenly aware that the abolition of US slavery had global significance. They not only understood that the world was watching how freed people would behave but also pressured the federal government and white Americans in general that how they would treat former slaves was a universal interest.

As for suffrage, they told white Tennesseans not to be surprised because free black Tennesseans had voted up to 1834, and the state “was quite safe and prosperous during the 39 years while she allowed negro suffrage.” They also reminded white Tennesseans that nothing had raised more oppositions than the enlistment of black people, but courageous conducts by black soldiers quieted them. If white people had such confidence in black people as to allow them to carry weapons during the war, they should have no trouble giving black people the ballot. In their mind, liberty without political rights was little different from being slaves. They argued that while ignorance was requisite for slaves, political rights would motivate black people to become intelligent and virtuous citizens.⁷¹

It was obvious from their petitions and proceedings that black Tennesseans did not believe in their inferiority as the reason for their enslavement. Rather, they clearly understood that black Americans were unjustly deprived of the natural right to be free and claimed that right based upon the Declaration of Independence. Even though they had been slaves not because of their innate inferiority, black Tennesseans admitted that having been deprived of educational opportunities for so long, they had many shortcomings at the

moment of emancipation. They therefore told their brethren to strive to uplift themselves, which they believed would end white Tennesseans' prejudice against them. Seeing before them a long journey to advance their standing in American society, it seems that black leaders felt tension as much as they were exhilarated at the dawn of freedom.⁷² Prominent black Tennesseans acted as intermediaries between Freedmen's Bureau officials stationed in Tennessee and local black people. As a way to educate freedmen, as early as 1865 black leaders published *Colored Tennesseans*.⁷³ It is a clear indication of their preparedness for the new days after slavery that black Tennesseans were very quick to take numerous actions, instead of being confused in a time of such radical changes.⁷⁴

Just as the state government enacted the Black Codes almost as soon as it abolished slavery, however, "the spirit of slavery" did not disappear with the end of slavery from the minds of white Tennesseans.⁷⁵ Among others, what worried black Tennesseans most was their lack of juridical rights. Suffrage was not necessarily the right all black Tennesseans wanted first. Former free black people and freedmen with some means regarded the participation in politics as the next step after the abolition of slavery. It was, however, a life-and-death problem to all black Tennesseans, rich and poor alike, that they could not testify in court or to serve on a jury in order to defend themselves. Because "[t]he testimony of twenty of the most intelligent, honorable, colored loyalists cannot convict a white traitor of a treasonable action," black Tennesseans had "only partial protection from the courts."⁷⁶

By the same token, because those were the rights many white Tennesseans wished to keep in order to nullify legal freedom black people gained, they vigorously fought against the move. As a matter of fact, black Tennesseans still could not be jurors even when they were able to vote. It is revealing that white Tennesseans resisted most ferociously against making black jurors who would adjudge them, more than anything else including suffrage (the state legislature gave black Tennessean a testimony right in 1866, followed by a voting right in 1867 and a right to serve on a jury in 1868).⁷⁷

Because the U. S. president during Reconstruction was a Tennessean, Andrew Johnson who hoped a quick return of his state to the Union, the state legislature ratified the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U. S. Constitution earlier than other states. It was, however, more out of a desire to be readmitted to the Union than a genuine concern for black people.

In fact, white Tennesseans came to regret that black Tennesseans acquired so many rights so quickly that they began assaulting black people. In the spring of 1866 a riot in Memphis killed forty-six black and two Irish people. What white people destroyed – churches and schools owned and managed by black Tennesseans – indicates that white people found it hard to accept the progress black people had made so quickly.⁷⁸ Soon after the Memphis riot, the Ku Klux Klan was born in Pulaski, Middle Tennessee, whose influence and damages all over the South are familiar to us.⁷⁹

In the immediate aftermath of the demise of slavery, black Tennesseans deliberately avoided the use of the word, equality. Or, when they used it, they clarified it as “legal not social equality.”⁸⁰ A group of black people from East Tennessee even suggested to “pass a law, forever debarring a marriage between the two races, throughout all time.”⁸¹ Because freedom foremost meant to the newly freed people a departure from the control of white people, they tried to physically separate themselves from white people. At the same time, since black people understood freedom to mean the ability to do what they had been prohibited from doing during slavery, which white people had normally done, it eventually would become necessary for them to advocate equality – civil, political, and social – in order to make freedom meaningful.

But white people did not appreciate that black people brought the concept of equality to the fore of political discourse in American society. Judging by the fact that most of the former slave states, including Tennessee, enacted a law prohibiting interracial marriage during Reconstruction, equality, which black Tennesseans described as “social equality” between black and white people, did matter to white Tennesseans.⁸² The problem was, however, more complicated than a conflict between black and white Tennesseans. Just as the loosening of slavery had already laid bare the cleavages among white Tennesseans, political equality of Afro-Americans would affect the power balance among white Tennesseans. White Tennesseans’ resistance to equality was not just because they simply did not want Afro-Americans to be their equals but also because it would affect a post-war contest over political power among white people themselves.⁸³

In the end, however quickly they attained various rights early in Reconstruction, black Tennesseans were unable to make use of those rights in the face of insurmountable resistance by white people and failed to send

a single black representative to the U. S. Congress during Reconstruction.⁸⁴ Emancipation made it clear that it was more difficult to achieve equality between white and black people than freedom in a society where slavery had been based strictly on racism against people of African descent. It is clear from their petitions that black Tennesseans hoped to realize the ideal mentioned in the Declaration of Independence – “All men are created equal.” But the Civil War provided them with freedom guaranteeing them only to be no longer chattels, but failed to give substance to freedom in a more meaningful sense.

Nevertheless, once black people became legally as free as white people, how to realize equality among its populace became a mission of American society.⁸⁵ Appearing first in the form of “separate but equal” doctrine in the *Pressy vs. Ferguson* in 1898, a fight for equality came to occupy the central stage of American politics after the war. As long as black people continued to be unfairly treated, there was no genuine equality to white people either, as in the case of discriminatory voting restrictions enacted after the end of Reconstruction, which deprived some white people of suffrage as well as the majority of black people.⁸⁶

We all know what the United States gained from the abolition of slavery: it made the United States a more politically unified nation and an economically advanced capitalist country. At last the United States came to swim with the global movement of emancipation during the nineteenth century. Judging by these consequences of the Civil War, Afro-Americans were true patriots. And, as black men from East Tennessee said, they could “do more to better the country.”⁸⁷ Their fight for freedom during the war and for equality after the abolition of slavery did invaluable service to making American society a step closer to its ideal democracy. Indeed, Afro-Americans left a lasting importance in that on their own initiative, they turned a war, which began with no humanitarian element, into a struggle for freedom, and continued to fight for equality.

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Appendix

First Confiscation Act (6 August 1861)

"...if any person or persons, being the owner or owners of any such **property**, shall knowingly use or employ, or consent to the use or employment of the same as aforesaid, all such **property** is hereby declared to be lawful subject of prize and capture wherever found." (Bold mine)

Additional Article of War (13 March 1862)

"All officers or persons in the military or naval service of the United States are prohibited from employing any of the forces under their respective commands for the purpose of returning **fugitives** from service or labor, who may have escaped from any persons to whom such service or labor is claimed to be due,..." (Bold mine)

Second Confiscation Act (17 July 1862)

“That all **slaves** of persons who shall hereafter be engaged in rebellion against the government of the United States, or who shall in any way give aid or comfort thereto, escaping from such persons and taking refuge within the lines of the army; and all **slaves** captured from such persons or deserted by them and coming under the control of the government of the United States; and all **slaves** of such persons found on [or] being within any place occupied by rebel forces and afterward occupied by the forces of the United States, shall be deemed captives of war, and shall be forever free of their servitude, and not again held as **slaves**.” (Bold mine)

Militia Act (17 July 1862)

“Sec. 12. *And be it further enacted*, That the President be, and he is hereby, authorized to receive into the service of the United States, for the purpose of constructing intrenchments, or performing camp service, or any other labor, or any military or naval service for which they may be found competent, **persons of African descent**, and such persons shall be enrolled and organized under such regulations, not inconsistent with the Constitution and laws, as the President may prescribe.

Sec. 13. *And be it further enacted*, That when any man or boy of **African descent**, who by the laws of any State shall owe service or labor to any person who, during the present rebellion, has levied war or has borne arms against the United States, or adhered to their enemies by giving them aid and comfort, shall render any such service as is provided for in this act, he, **his mother and his wife and children**, shall forever thereafter be free, any law, usage, or customs whatsoever to the contrary notwithstanding: *Provided*, That the **mother, wife and children** of such man or boy of **African descent** shall not be made free by the operation of this act except where such mother, wife or children owe service or labor to some person who, during the present rebellion, has borne arms against the United States or adhered to their enemies by giving them aid and comfort.” (Bold mine, Italic in original)