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“A Typical Negro”: Gordon, Peter, Vincent Colyer, and the Story Behind Slavery’s Most Famous Photograph

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Abstract

The image of the “scourged back” remains one of the most visually arresting depictions of slavery. Based on a photograph taken in Baton Rouge in April 1863 and later published in *Harper’s Weekly*, it has become one of the most widely reprinted and recognizable images of American slavery. However, despite the image’s ubiquity, we know relatively little about the image and the man featured in it. Most historians who have examined the image accept the narrative in the accompanying *Harper’s* article as an accurate account of the subject’s life and the image’s origins. This article argues, however, that there is good evidence to suggest that the accompanying article was largely fabricated and much of what we think we know about “Gordon” may be inaccurate.

Word Count: 7,838.

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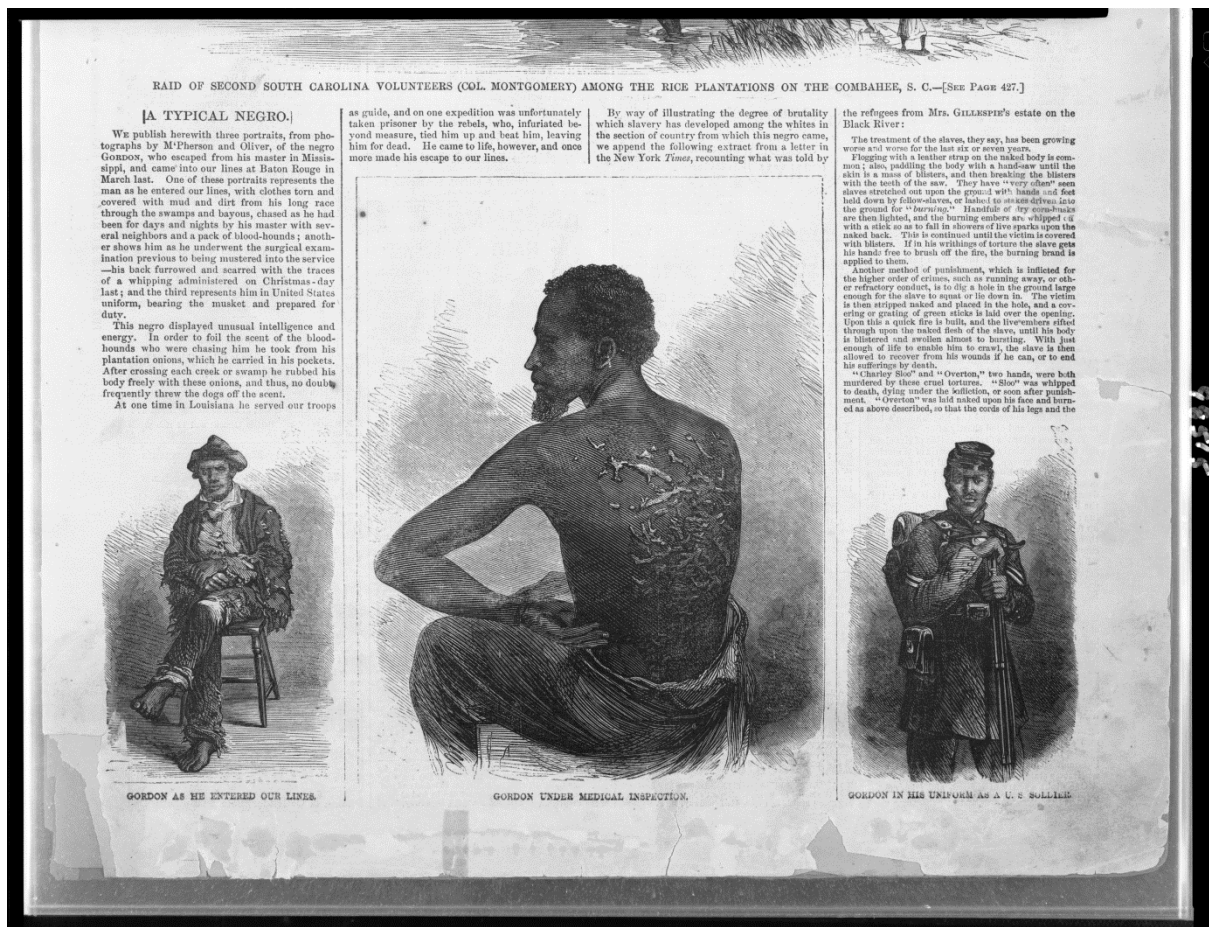


Figure 1. *Harper's Weekly*, 4 July 1863. Image courtesy the Library of Congress.

The image of Gordon, his back scarred from whipping, remains one of the most visually arresting depictions of slavery. Based on photographs taken in Baton Rouge in April 1863, the image gained notoriety originally as a carte-de-visite (CDV), before being published as an engraving in *Harper's Weekly* in a special Fourth of July issue that same year. The image illustrated to the Northern public and Union soldiers the brutality of the slavery. In the one hundred and fifty years since the image was created, it has become one of

the most widely reprinted and recognizable images of American slavery, a common fixture in textbooks, university lectures, museum displays, and documentaries. However, despite the image's ubiquity, we know relatively little about the image and the man featured in it. Most historians who have examined the image have accepted the narrative in the accompanying *Harper's* article as an accurate account of the subject's life and the image's origins. This article argues, however, that there is good evidence to suggest that the accompanying article was largely fabricated and much of what we think we know about "Gordon" may be inaccurate.¹

¹ Many scholars have commented on the "scourged back" image, including Kathleen Collins, "The Scourged Back," *History of Photography* 9 (1985): 43-45; Cassandra Jackson, *Violence, Visual Culture, and the Black Male Body* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 13-24; Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future after Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 62-64; Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 266-269; Deborah Willis and Barbara Krauthamer, *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 37; Margaret Abruzzo, *Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 201-205; Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 173-174; Carole Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 102-104. On its use in textbooks, see Louis P. Masur, "'Pictures Have Now Become a Necessity': The Use of Images in American History Textbooks," *Journal of American History*, 84 (1998): 1416-1419. On the contemporary uses of the "scourged back" image, see Zoe Trodd, "Am I still Not a Man and a Brother? Protest Memory in Contemporary Antislavery Visual Culture,"

As Carole Emberton has recently observed, the transition embodied in the “Gordon” triptych “played an important role in the redemptive narrative of the war.” It was a part of a larger genre of images that chronicled the transition from slave to soldier, from bondsman to citizen. “Gordon’s” suffering, the focal point of the triptych, helped to justify his assumption of the uniform and the rifle. For a public uncertain about the merits of African American as soldiers, the redemptive nature of the image helped to justify the enlistment of black soldiers and later for black citizenship.² This article will demonstrate, however, that in the process of creating a sympathetic and politically powerful image, abolitionists and newspaper publishers, even the most well-intentioned, were willing to homogenize African Americans and their individual experiences in the service of the redemptive narrative. In creating the

Slavery & Abolition 34 (2013): 338-352. A vexing problem, one that this essay will not try to answer, is how singular the image of the “scourged back” remains among the photographic representations of slavery. Although there are a handful of other images from the same time as the “scourged back” that intend to show the brutality of slavery, we have far fewer of these images than one might expect. Of these, the only images that might rival the “scourged back” are the photographs of Wilson Chinn, “a branded slave,” sometimes pictured with the “instruments of torture used to punish Slaves.” Like the man in the “scourged back,” Wilson Chinn came from Louisiana and was photographed in 1863. If the scarring featured in the “scourged back” was not unique – and the sources tell us that it was not – then why do we not have a much larger photographic inventory to accompany the “scourged back”? Given the popularity of the “scourged back” first as a CDV, and then as an engraving, why didn’t ambitious photographers produce more?

² Carole Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 102-104.

image of “Gordon,” they simultaneously highlighted slavery’s brutality and dismissed the individual experience of the man in the image.

The “scourged back” image was published in *Harper’s* at a critical moment in Northern public sentiment towards to Union war effort and emancipation. The disastrous defeats at Fredericksburg in December 1862 and Chancellorsville in early May 1863 had pushed many Northerners to conclude that the war was unwinnable, or at least to question the merits of continuing to fight. The Emancipation Proclamation, only months old, remained deeply unpopular among major segments of the Northern populace. So too was conscription, with the first Federal draft of soldiers into the Union army scheduled for July 1863. Six months before it published the “scourged back” image, *Harper’s Weekly* lamented that “the people have borne, silently, and grimly, imbecility, treachery, failure, privations, loss of friends.”³ The “scourged back” appeared, therefore, during a nadir in public support for the war effort.

The Origins of the Image

The image printed in *Harper’s* was part of a triptych, in which the image of the scourged back, labelled in the article as “Gordon Under Inspection,” was flanked by two smaller images, labelled “Gordon as He Entered Our Lines” and “Gordon in His Uniform as a U.S. Soldier” (figure 1). The accompanying article, entitled “A Typical Negro,” indicates that the three images were based on photographs taken by McPherson and Oliver. The article names the subject as “Gordon,” a slave “who escaped from his master in Mississippi, and came into our lines at Baton Rouge in March last.” The article indicates that the scarring on his back was the result of whipping he had received the previous Christmas, and that he had escaped from slavery using onions to disguise his smell from dogs sent in pursuit. The article

³ *Harper’s Weekly*, 27 December 1862.

also mentions that Gordon had served at one point as a guide for Union troops in Louisiana and was captured by Confederate soldiers, who “tied him up and beat him, leaving him for dead,” but somehow survived and returned to Union lines.⁴

Only a few elements in the *Harper's* article can be independently verified. The photographers William D. McPherson and his partner Oliver were present in Baton Rouge at the time when the images were purportedly taken. Although several dozen of their photographs survive, comparatively little is known about the men themselves or their partnership. Some historians have argued that they were originally from Baton Rouge, while others claim that they arrived with the Union occupation in May 1862. The vast majority of their surviving photographs are exterior images of buildings, fortifications, cannons, Union ships, and groups of Union soldiers. Compared to their other surviving photographs, the images that later featured in *Harper's Weekly* are unusual, as the studio apparently did little business in individual portraiture. Unlike most Civil War era photographers, McPherson and Oliver did not often create carte-de-visite for soldiers. The scoured back image is also unusual in that all of the copies purportedly taken by McPherson and Oliver lack a backmark naming the photo studio, a feature common in all of their other known images. Its absence should cause us to doubt whether McPherson and Oliver were responsible for the photo, and provides some indication that the narrative in “A Typical Negro” may not be entirely accurate.⁵

⁴ “A Typical Negro,” *Harper's Weekly*, 4 July 1863.

⁵ Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers from the Mississippi to the Continental Divide: A Biographical Dictionary, 1839-1865* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 430-431; Bob Zeller, *The Blue and Gray in Black and White: A History of Civil War Photography* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood, 2005), 145; Carl H. Moneyhon and Bobby Leon Roberts, *Portraits of Conflict: Photographic History of*

The photos were taken in a new medium known as a carte-de-visite (CDV). Invented in Paris, the carte-de-visite became popular in the United States in 1860. Measuring 2.5 by 4 inches, the fragile albumen prints were mounted on stiff cardboard. CDV differed from earlier photo formats in several important respects. Unlike the ambrotype or daguerreotype, which required a fragile glass case to protect the image, the CDV images could be easily mailed, allowing the images to circulate with unprecedented speed. CDV were also much cheaper to produce, especially in volume. Whereas making multiple prints from an ambrotype or daguerreotype negative was often impossible or prohibitively expensive, mechanical reproduction of CDV was easy and inexpensive. Selling a dozen for a dollar, the CDV was the first mass market photograph medium.⁶

The photographer, whether it was McPherson and Oliver or some unknown party, made at least three prints of the scourged back, each of which saw wide circulation as CDV and reprinted in a variety of media. Although all three photographs display ostensibly the same pose and camera angle, several features distinguish them. In two of the pictures, Gordon has his left hand at his waist facing down with a prominent peak in his hair. Of these

Louisiana in the Civil War (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1990), 5. For images by McPherson and Oliver, see images at the Louisiana Digital Library

(<http://louisdl.louislibraries.org/cdm/search/searchterm/McPherson%20&%20Oliver,%20photographers/mode/exact>) or at the Library of Congress

(<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/related/?fi=name&q=McPherson%20%26%20Oliver>).

⁶ Lara Perry, “The Carte de Visite in the 1860s and the Serial Dynamic of the Photographic Likeness,” *Art History* 35 (2012): 728-749; Andrea Volpe, “The Middle is Material: Cartes de Visite Photographs and the Culture of Class Formation,” in *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class*, ed. Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston (New York: Routledge, 2001), 157-169.

two images, the chair's back is visible in one photo (figure 2) and not in the other (figure 3), and the orientation of the head is slightly different. In the third picture, his hand is twisted upwards and his hair is noticeably curlier, longer, and lacking the projecting knot (figure 4). The most significant difference in the final photograph is that Gordon's neck is twisted more to the left towards the camera, revealing his full profile and his beard, which is either totally or partially obscured by his shoulder in the other images. The combined effect of these minor changes in the photos' composition made the final image subtly, but noticeably more arresting. The differences between the photographs suggest that they were taken on separate days. Having developed prints for the first two images, the photographer saw the potential for a more dramatic image and recalled Gordon to the studio, recreating the image with slight improvements.⁷ It was this final image, with his face in full profile that became the basis for the image in *Harper's Weekly*.⁸

⁷ Margaret Abruzzo presents an alternative interpretation of the differences in hair style. She argues that the version with shorter hair represents a "shaved Gordon"; that the image with the longer hair was taken first and the other image taken later. Abruzzo only identified one of the two versions of the image with short hair. See Abruzzo, *Polemical Pain*, 201-202.

⁸ For examples of images purported taken by McPherson and Oliver, see International Center of Photography,

[http://emuseum.icp.org/view/objects/asitem/People\\$0040937/0?t:state:flow=8bbbf159-4a8b-4659-a625-b4e963eadf6c;](http://emuseum.icp.org/view/objects/asitem/People$0040937/0?t:state:flow=8bbbf159-4a8b-4659-a625-b4e963eadf6c;)



Figures 2-4. Images Courtesy National Archives, Cowan Auctions, National Portrait Gallery.

Two sources suggest that the initial photo session took place on April 2, 1863. The first is a copy sold at a private auction, the handwritten inscription on the back by J.W. Mercer, an assistant surgeon with the 47th Massachusetts Volunteers, indicates that the photo was taken “from life ... at Baton Rouge, La., April 2nd, 1863.” Mercer also notes that “I have found a large number of the four hundred contraband examined by me to be as badly lacerated as the specimen [r]epresented in the enclosed photograph.”⁹ The second is a copy at the National Archives, whose reverse inscription reads: “Overseer Artayou Carrier whipped me. I was two months in bed sore from the whipping. My master come after I was whipped; he discharged the overseer. The very words of poor Peter, taken as he sat for his picture. Baton Rouge, Louisiana., 04/02/1863.”¹⁰ These two images, showing both of the early

⁹ <http://www.cowanauctions.com/auctions/item.aspx?ItemId=76487>

¹⁰ <http://research.archives.gov/description/533232>

versions of the scourged back photo, agree both on the time and the place where the photos were taken. The third version was probably taken sometime later that month.

Distribution and Use of the Photograph

Whoever took the initial photographs, the scourged back image was widely reproduced by other photography studios, including those of Mathew Brady in Washington, D.C. and New York, McAllister & Brothers in Philadelphia, C. Seaver in Boston, and Frederick Jones in London. The reverse of some of these reproductions feature a quotation from S.K. Towle, Surgeon of the 30th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers, stationed at Baton Rouge: “I enclose a picture taken by an artist here, from life, of a Negro’s back, exhibiting the scars from an old whipping. Few sensation writers ever depicted worse punishments than this man must have received, though nothing in his appearance indicates any unusual viciousness – but on the contrary, he seems INTELLIGENT and WELL-BEHAVED.”¹¹ Some historians have posited that Towle himself participated in Gordon’s medical examination, although there is no evidence of this.¹²

Abolitionists were quick to make use of the image. On May 28, 1863, Henry Ward Beecher’s *Independent* published the first account of the photograph in an article entitled “The Scourged Back,” giving the image its most common title. According to the article, the image of “a slave’s naked back, lacerated by the whip” had been taken on April 2, 1863 in Baton Rouge and that the whipping had taken place in October 1862. Unlike fugitive slave narratives or novels such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the photograph’s veracity could not be

¹¹ Kathleen Collins, “The Scourged Back,” *History of Photography* 9 (1985): 43-45.

¹² On Towle’s medical role in Baton Rouge, see S.K. Towle, “Notes of Practice in the U.S.A. General Hospital, Baton Rouge, La., during the Year 1863,” *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 70 (1864): 46-60. Towle suggests that he did not start working in the hospital in Baton Rouge until May 1863, after the “scourged back” image was taken.

doubted, according to the *Independent*, as the “instrument can’t lie.” The “black man with the scarred back,” it argued, was symbolic of the brutality of the “slave system, and of the society that sustains it. ... This card photograph should be multiplied by one hundred thousand, and scattered over the States. It tells the story in a way that even Mrs. Stowe cannot approach, because it tells the story to the eye.”¹³

William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator* first mentioned the image two weeks later in an article written by Garrison’s son, entitled “The Dumb Witness.” The *Liberator* had obtained the photo courtesy of the brother of the surgeon for the 1st Louisiana Colored Regiment, who had enclosed it in a letter. Excerpted in the article, the accompanying letter described the image as “a slave as he appears after a whipping,” noting that the surgeon had seen “hundreds such sights.”¹⁴ Significantly, the article noted that the photograph was readily available for sale in Boston. In the same issue, a notice in the *Liberator* indicated that interested parties could obtain copies of the photo by writing to the paper’s editor, obtaining one copy for “15 cents ... Seven copies for one dollar, or \$1.50 per dozen.” The notice ran regularly in the *Liberator* for two months.¹⁵

The CDV of the scourged back entered into well-developed abolitionist networks that had long recognized the importance of photography in demonstrating the evils of slavery and the humanity and resilience of African Americans. Frederick Douglass, Charlotte Forten, and Sojourner Truth all saw the value that photography had in disseminating images of themselves in giving a public face to the political issue of slavery. They knew that Civil War

¹³ “The Scourged Back,” [New York] *Independent* 28 May 1863. The article may have been written by Rev. Octavius Brooks Frothingham, a Unitarian abolitionist. See “The Scourged Back,” *Christian Inquirer*, 1 August 1863.

¹⁴ “The Dumb Witness,” *Liberator*, 12 June 1863.

¹⁵ *Liberator*, 12 June 1863.

era Americans believed that the medium of photography, unlike drawings or paintings, had greater claims to objectivity. Douglass recognized that photography could serve as a meaningful counterweight to the racist imagery rampant in Northern culture. In 1849 he claimed that “Negroes can never have impartial portraits, at the hands of white artists. It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likenesses of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their distinctive features.” He saw photography as a truth-telling medium that could bore through racist preconceptions.¹⁶

While the image of the scourged back that would become the centerpiece for the triptych published in *Harper’s Weekly* was ubiquitous in the two months before its publication, the two images that were to flank it were very rare. While more than fifty versions of the scourged back exist in archives and museums, the only copy of the photo that became “Gordon as He Entered Our Lines” was sold in a private auction in 2008, and no copies of the photograph that served as the basis for “Gordon in His Uniform” have been located.¹⁷ This singular “Entered Our Lines” photo differs from any of the myriad versions of the scourged back photos in two important respects (figure 5). First, its reverse bears the McPherson and Oliver’s imprint, unlike any of the extant scourged back CDV. Second, it appears that the photo that served as the basis for “Entered Our Lines” is a different individual than the person depicted in the scourged back photos. Although the different camera angles and poses makes direct comparison difficult, the individual in the “Entered Our Lines” photo has a more prominent nose and brow line and lacks the facial hair present

¹⁶ *North Star*, 7 April 1849; Willis and Krauthamer, *Envisioning Emancipation*, 17-18, 28; John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 50; Teresa Zackodnik, “The ‘Green-Backs’ of Civilization: Sojourner Truth and Portrait Photography,” *American Studies* 46 (2005): 117-143.

¹⁷ Cowan Auctions. <http://www.cowanauctions.com/auctions/item.aspx?ItemId=66246>

in the scourged back. He also appears to be significantly younger than the individual in the scourged back images.



Figure 6. Courtesy Cowan Auctions.

The scourged back received its widest dissemination when it was published in *Harper's Weekly* in early July 1863. Established in 1857, *Harper's Weekly* was the second illustrated newspaper established in the United States, after *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* which began printing two year earlier. During the Civil War, the circulation of both papers often exceeded 100,000 per issue. The competing papers vied with each other for the quality of illustrations (sometimes made by soldiers who received a free subscription in exchange for their sketches, as well as dispatched artists employed by the newspapers) and the speed with which they published images of significant events. Under ideal conditions, two to three weeks passed between the sketching of an image in the field and its appearance in print. During this critical interval, both papers scrambled to send images from the front lines to their headquarters in New York, where they would be translated by engravers into woodcut block prints and then a copper duplicate which was attached to the rotary printing press.

Although both *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's* repeatedly assured their readers that the published images accurately represented events in the field, both papers routinely cut corners in an effort to reach their readers first. The easiest way to shortcut this publication schedule was for illustrators in New York to fabricate depictions of events they did not witness. The era's most famous illustrator, Thomas Nast, who worked first for *Frank Leslie's* and then for *Harper's Weekly*, rarely left New York, building his images from written accounts. Fellow illustrator Theodore Davis, who did spend considerable time on the front lines, criticized Nast for cultivating a "reputation of a war artist, without the unpleasant necessity of exposing himself either to the hardships of campaign life or the dangers of the battlefield." At times, the images printed in illustrated newspapers bore only a passing resemblance to the events depicted.¹⁸

The article in *Harper's Weekly* does not reveal how the newspaper acquired the images that it reprinted in July 1863, although versions of the scoured back would have been in wide circulation in New York City for at least a month. Historians have attributed the drawings to either Thomas Nast or Theodore Davis, both well-known artists in *Harper's*

¹⁸ Andrea G. Pearson, "Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper and Harper's Weekly: Innovation and Imitation in Nineteenth-Century American Pictorial Reporting," *Journal of Popular Culture* 23 (1990): 81-111; William Fletcher Thompson, Jr., "Illustrating the Civil War," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 45 (1961), 10-20; Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1-57; Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 95-100.

Weekly stable of illustrators.¹⁹ The mostly likely illustrator for the three images that appeared in *Harper's* was neither Nast nor Davis, but the much less well-known artist Vincent Colyer.

The Illustrator and the Soldier

Born in Bloomington, New York in 1825, Colyer had studied painting at the National Academy in New York City, an institution that produced many of the illustrators employed by *Harper's Weekly*. A devoted Quaker and abolitionist, Colyer volunteered in the early months of the Civil War to providing spiritual and physical comfort to soldiers, becoming one of the founding leaders of the U.S. Christian Commission in November 1861. In February 1862, Colyer volunteered to accompany General Ambrose Burnside's invasion of coastal North Carolina. There he played a vital role aiding not only soldiers, but also the thousands of black refugees who flocked to the Union standard, playing a critical role in supporting them in the early tentative months in their transition from slavery to freedom. Colyer resigned his post to protest Abraham Lincoln's appointment of Edward Stanly to the post of military governor of North Carolina. From a slaveholding family, Stanly had been appointed to re-establish civilian government in Union-occupied eastern North Carolina. To Colyer's horror, Stanly interpreted his mandate to include enforcing North Carolina's antebellum laws on slavery, including returning fugitive slaves to their owners. After an unsuccessful personal appeal to President Lincoln, Colyer returned to his home in New York City in July 1862. There he provided aid for black families hurt during the July 1863 Draft Riots and worked as a recruiter for the United States Colored Troops. After the Civil War, Vincent Colyer established tandem careers as a humanitarian and as a landscape artist. In the half dozen years after Appomattox, Colyer worked to improve relationships between Native Americans and the federal government. As member of the Board of Indian Commissioners,

¹⁹ William Fletcher Thompson, Jr. "Pictorial Images of the Negro during the Civil War,"

Wisconsin Magazine of History 48 (1965): 291.

Colyer travelled extensively in the American West, working with the Apache in New Mexico and Arizona, and Aleuts in Alaska. He also returned to his pre-war occupation as a painter, becoming one of the best known landscape painters in the country, drawing heavily upon his travels in the West, as well as local scenes near his studio in Connecticut.²⁰

²⁰ Vincent Colyer, *Report of the Services Rendered by the Freed People to the United States Army, in North Carolina, in the Spring of 1862, after the Battle of Newbern* (New York: Vincent Colyer, 1864); Vincent Colyer, *Report of the Committee of Merchants for the Relief of Colored People, Suffering from the Late Riots in the City of New York* (New York : G.A. Whitehorne, printer, 1863); Vincent Colyer, "Report of Mr. Vincent Colyer," *Union League Club Report on Volunteering* (New York: Club House, 1864), 35-52; Vincent Colyer, *Peace with the Apaches in New Mexico and Arizona* (Washington: GPO, 1872); Vincent Colyer, *Alaska Report of Hon. Vincent Colyer* (Washington: GPO, 1869); Vincent Colyer, *Report of Christian Mission to the United States Army* (New York: Whitehorne, 1862), 2-10; Vincent Colyer, *Notes Among the Indians* (New Rochelle, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1869); Nathan Bishop, *A Memorial Record of the New York Branch of the United States Christian Commission* (New York: Gray & Green, 1866), 9-12; James O. Henry, "The United States Christian Commission in the Civil War," *Civil War History* 12 (1960): 374-376; David Raney, "In the Lord's Army: The United States Christian Commission in the Civil War," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2001); William C. Harris, "Lincoln and Wartime Reconstruction in North Carolina, 1861-1863," *North Carolina Historical Review* 63 (1986): 165-166; O.O. Howard, "The Freedmen during the War," *New Princeton Review* 1 (1886): 381-382; Patricia Click, *Time Full of Trial: The Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 1-56; *Daily Alta California*, 15 October 1871.

Several factors point to Colyer as the likely illustrator of the triptych. First, Colyer had returned to New York a few months before the image appeared in *Harper's* and would have been interested in both the financial and political advantages that creating abolitionist images for *Harper's* would provide. Second, Colyer later published several images in *Harper's* based on his Western travels among Native Americans, revealing that he had some connection with the newspaper.²¹ Third, and most critically, however, Colyer reprinted the two flanking images in the triptych one year later in his illustrated volume *Report of the Services Rendered by the Freed People to the United States Army, in North Carolina*. Here, however, the images are described as not Gordon, a runaway slave from Mississippi, as he was described in *Harper's*, but as Furney Bryant, a runaway slave from North Carolina “who came within our lines dressed in the rags of the plantation.”²²



²¹ For instance, see *Harper's Weekly*, 19 Feb. 1870; 18 August 1877.

²² Colyer, *Services Rendered*, 13.

Figures 7 and 8. Vincent Colyer, *Report of the Services Rendered by the Freed People to the United States Army* (New York: Vincent Colyer, 1864), 13-14.

In *Report of the Services Rendered*, the two images have been relabelled as images of Furney Bryant rather than Gordon: “Gordon as He Entered Our Lines” has become “Furney Bryant, the Refugee,” and “Gordon in His Uniform as a U.S. Soldier” has become “Sergeant Furney Bryant, 1st North Carolina Colored Troops” (figures 7 and 8). Although the caption on the second image describes Bryant as a sergeant, his uniform prominently displays only two chevrons, indicating a corporal, rather than three chevrons as would be appropriate for a sergeant. According to Colyer, Furney Bryant arrived in New Bern, North Carolina in 1862, probably shortly after the Union occupation of the city in March. He attended the schools in New Bern run by Colyer, ventured into the nearby Confederate military camp at Kinston to spy under Colyer’s supervision, and, after Colyer’s departure, enlisted in the First North Carolina Colored Regiment. Fighting under Major General Quincy Gilmore in South Carolina, Bryant was promoted to First Sergeant for his bravery, earning him a thirty day furlough. During his furlough, Bryant returned to New Bern via New York, where he visited Colyer. During his brief stay in New Bern, he participated in the defense of the city in February 1864 against an attack by Confederate General George Pickett, before returning to his unit, now stationed in Florida. Shortly thereafter, he fought in the Battle of Olustee, the largest Civil War battle in Florida. On March 23, 1864, Bryant, now stationed in Jacksonville, Florida, wrote to Colyer to thank him for “all his care and affection which you have shown towards the colored people.”²³

Much of Colyer’s account of Furney Bryant’s life can be independently verified. Bryant enlisted in the 1st North Carolina Colored Troops (later rebranded the 35th USCT) on

²³ Colyer, *Services Rendered*, 13-14.

May 21, 1863, making him one of the first black men in North Carolina to formally volunteer. Military records indicate that he was 28 years old at the time of his enlistment and that he had come to New Bern from Kinston. He enlisted at the same time as several other men with the same surname, including Lewis Bryant, whom Furney Bryant also mentions by name in his March 1864 letter to Colyer. After a brief time in camp at New Bern, the First North Carolina Regiment was ordered to Charleston on July 30, 1863. They arrived at Folly Island two weeks after the failed efforts by the 54th Massachusetts to assault the Confederate position at Fort Wagner. He fought in several battles in Florida, was mustered out of service in 1866, and died in 1900.²⁴

In *Services Rendered*, Vincent Colyer provided a third depiction of Furney Bryant in addition to the two images that had previously appeared in *Harper's* (figure 9). In it, Bryant fights alongside another black soldier in the defense of New Bern during the first week of February 1864. Several features of this image are worth noting. First, whereas the two dozen other images in the text purported to be taken from life, this image is clearly a creation of Colyer's imagination, as he was in New York during the attack on New Bern. Second, Bryant's uniform lacks the chevrons appropriate to his rank, chevrons that feature prominently in the "Sergeant Furney Bryant, 1st North Carolina Colored Troops"/ "Gordon in His Uniform as a U.S. Soldier" image. Third, although the pose of the third image makes direct comparison difficult, the person depicted appears to resemble, at least superficially, the first two depictions of Furney Bryant.

²⁴ Richard Reid, "Raising the African Brigade: Early Black Recruitment in Civil War North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* 70 (1993): 266-301; Descriptive Rolls, 35th Regiment, United States Colored Troops, RG 94, NARA. Images of Bryant's grave are available here: <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=106434889>



Figure 9. Vincent Colyer, *Report of the Services Rendered by the Freed People to the United States Army* (New York: Vincent Colyer, 1864), 18.

In all likelihood, none of Vincent Colyer’s three depictions of Furney Bryant accurately represents him. The McPherson and Oliver CDV upon which the “Gordon as He Entered Our Lines”/“Furney Bryant, the Refugee” image is based clearly indicates from the photographers’ imprint that the image was made in Baton Rouge. The most likely scenario suggested by the evidence is that the two flanking images that appeared in the *Harper’s* triptych and later reprinted by Colyer in his *Report on Services Rendered* are based on photos taken in Baton Rouge.

“A Typical Negro”

Several claims made in the *Harper’s Weekly* article contradict other sources about the identity of the subject, his origins, and the date of his whipping. Sources published or written prior the publication of the *Harper’s* piece uniformly claim that the subject was from Louisiana and that the scars on his back were the product of a whipping in October 1862. The article in *Harper’s*, however, claims that the subject was from Mississippi and that the whipping occurred on Christmas day, 1862. The article also introduced a new attribute, a

name for the subject: Gordon. In earlier published descriptions of the scourged back image, the subject is nameless. The *Independent* called him merely “the black man with the scarred back,” while the *Liberator* referred to him as “a former slave – now, thanks to the Union army, a freeman.” The CDV’s also fail to provide the subject with a name, with the exception of the copy housed at the National Archives, which identifies the subject as “Peter.” The subject’s subsequent career as a guide and a soldier is also unique to *Harper’s*.

Where did *Harper’s* obtain these details about the life of the man in the scourged back image? Published without a byline, the article does not indicate how it obtained the images, although the scourged back CDV was in wide circulation in New York by the time *Harper’s* went to print. One possibility is that Vincent Colyer was responsible not only for the illustrations in *Harper’s*, but also for the accompanying article. Comparing the brief but detailed narrative in the accompanying *Harper’s* article with Colyer’s descriptions of fugitive slaves in *Report on the Services Rendered* reveals some striking similarities. *Harper’s* describes “Gordon” running “through the swamps and bayous, chased as he had been for days and nights by his master with several neighbors and a pack of blood-hounds.” Colyer describes a fugitive slave named Charley running through “swamps” being chased by “a pack of blood-hounds,” another fugitive slave named William Kinney hiding “in the woods and swamps,” and an unnamed fugitive slave-scout “through woods and swamps.”²⁵ Gordon rubbed “plantation onions” on his body after “crossing every creek or swamp” to throw “the dogs off his scent.” Colyer’s Charley took “to the water in the swamps” to throw off “the scent of the dogs,” while an unnamed slave from Tarboro was “chased by dogs” and “escaped by bathing his feet of his party in turpentine, which is said to effectively destroy the scent, and prevent the dogs from following the trail.”²⁶ To be sure, the methods that fugitive slaves

²⁵ Colyer, *Services Rendered*, 15, 19, 24.

²⁶ Colyer, *Services Rendered*, 15, 24.

would have used to evade blood-hounds would have been similar in the swamps of Colyer's eastern North Carolina and "Gordon's" lower Mississippi Valley, and many of these elements are familiar tropes from fugitive slave narratives. Nonetheless, the way they are described hints that they may have been written by the same man.

Another passage in the *Harper's* article echoes a passage in Colyer's *Report on Services Rendered*. According to *Harper's*, Gordon "served our troops as [a] guide, and on one expedition was unfortunately taken prisoner by the rebels, who, infuriated beyond measure, tied him up and beat him, leaving him for dead. He came to life, however, and once more made his escape to our lines." In *Report on Services Rendered* Colyer describes black scouts and spies who, under Colyer's supervision, went on "expeditions" into Confederate territory and "were pursued on several occasions by blood-hounds, two or three of them were taken prisoners; one of them was known to have been shot."²⁷ Although these brief passages are insufficient to attribute authorship of the *Harper's* article to Colyer, in conjunction with his likely role in the composition of the accompanying illustrations, his later association with *Harper's*, and his New York residence in the months prior to the article's publication point in his direction. If so, this suggests that the narrative in the *Harper's* article about "Gordon" is likely a composite based on Colyer's experience with fugitive slaves in North Carolina. This interpretation is supported by the article's title, "A Typical Slave," which suggests that it does not necessarily describe a specific slave and by Colyer's willingness to repurpose the "Entered Our Lines" and "In His Uniform" illustrations in his *Report on Services Rendered*.

Although readers of *Harper's Weekly* may have appreciated the symbolic value of the triptych, there is little evidence to suggest that they interpreted the images and the accompanying article as literal. The publication of the scourged back in *Harper's Weekly* came at the intersection of two forms of new media – the illustrated and the carte-de-visite.

²⁷ Colyer, *Services Rendered*, 9.

While Civil War era Americans placed a great deal of faith in the veracity of photographic evidence, they were often sceptical of the accuracy of the illustrated press, whose coverage at times bordered on the sensational. Readers, therefore, would have been much more likely to believe in the images' reliability than in the accompanying text. One way to gauge how much faith readers put in the *Harper's* article is how often the details were reproduced. In the months after the publication of the scourged back in *Harper's Weekly* on July 4, 1863, many newspapers made reference to the scourged back image.²⁸ In few of these references did the novel elements contained within the *Harper's* article reappear, suggesting that readers did not take the text of "A Typical Negro" to accurately reflect the experience of the individual in the image. The name "Gordon," for instance, rarely appears in references to the image made in the four months after its appearance in *Harper's*.

Not unsurprisingly, the Copperhead press rejected the validity of both the images and the article. One commentator observed that "no sooner had this heart-striking picture begun to circulate and awaken a thrill of horror among the loyal and humane portion of the community, than the Copperhead press at once spit forth their poisonous venom, and boldly asserted that the whole story was a fabrication from beginning to end," claiming that the narrative was the product of "a fanatical Abolitionist's deluded imagination."²⁹ Some Copperhead newspapers suggested that the photographed slave was "guilty, no doubt, of

²⁸ *Christian Inquirer*, 4 August 1863; *Independent*, 13 August 1863, 4 February 1864; *Dollar Weekly Bulletin* (Maysville, Kentucky), 3 September 1863; *Indiana State Sentinel*, 4 January 1864.

²⁹ *New York Tribune*, 3 December 1863. On the Copperhead press, see Jennifer L. Weber, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Ray H. Abrams, "Copperhead Newspapers and the Negro," *Journal of Negro History* 20 (1935):131-152.

crime” that justified his whipping.³⁰ Others claimed that the whipping depicted paled in comparison to the brutality enacted on pro-Confederate white women, citing the case of “female political prisoner” who was lashed “across the shoulders with a cowhide” and “dragging her down stairs by the hair and kicking her on the way to the cell.”³¹ Similarly, the *Boston Courier* called for a “‘photographic likeness’ of the scourged back of the man flagged by the provost marshal in Pittsburg without the color of law, to accompany the picture with the abolitionists got up of the ‘Louisiana slave’s back.’”³²

In respond to the Copperhead critique, the New York *Tribune* published a letter in December 1863 that purported to be from the individual who had brought the images from Louisiana to *Harper’s Weekly*. The letter writer, who identified himself only as “Bostonian”, was moved to come forward to counter the “‘Copperhead’ falsehood.” He claimed that “the original photographs from which the two faithful engravings in *Harper’s Weekly* were copie[s] I brought from Louisiana last June, and I can therefore vouch for their entire accuracy, as well as the truthfulness of the brief account of the outrages perpetrated upon the unoffending negroes which was published in connection with the pictures.” However, despite his assertion of the “truthfulness of the brief account,” Bostonian suggested a narrative behind the images that differed in places from one that appeared in *Harper’s Weekly*. He claimed that on March 24, 1863, four slaves belonging to “Capt. John Lyons and Louis Fabyan of Clinton, La. started off at midnight in search of freedom, which they well knew

³⁰ *Philadelphia Age*, quoted in *Dollar Weekly Bulletin* (Maysville, Kentucky), 3 September 1863.

³¹ *Crisis* (Columbus, Ohio), quoted in *Dollar Weekly Bulletin* (Maysville, Kentucky), 3 September 1863.

³² *Boston Courier*, quoted in *Dollar Weekly Bulletin* (Maysville, Kentucky), 3 September 1863.

would be guaranteed them as soon as they reached our lines at Baton Rouge.” On the second day after their escape, one of the four fugitive slaves, whom Bostonian referred to as “John,” went off in search of food, only to be killed by slave hunters that had been sent to search for them. According to Bostonian, the three other members of the party made it to Union lines on April 2, 1863, where they were interrogated in the Provost Marshal’s office. Bostonian named two of the three slaves: Gordon and Peter. According to Bostonian, “poor Peter” was “the name of the negro whose lacerated back . . . has excited the sympathy and indignation of every humanitarian that has seen it.” He spoke “little English, and that in broke accents,” as “the majority of the negroes in Louisiana” spoke French. Questioned in French, Peter was asked why he had run away. He “pulled down the pile of dirty rags that half concealed his back, and which was once a shirt, and exhibited his mutilated sable form to the crowd of officers and others present in the office.” According to Bostonian, the sight “sent a thrill of horror to every white person present, but the few Blacks who were waiting for passes, both men, women and children, paid but little attention to the sad spectacle, such terrible scenes being painfully familiar to them all.” Peter claimed not to remember the whipping that left him scarred, although he said that it had happened “two months before Christmas,” and that his overseer Artayon Carrier had held the lash. During the two months he spent recovering from the whipping, Peter was told that he had been whipped because he “was sort of crazy and tried to shoot everybody,” including his wife, and had “burned up all my clothes,” events that Peter claimed not to remember. Peter’s wife told him after he recovered that he “no [sic] do these things.” Seeing Peter’s scars, his owner, John Lyon, dismissed the overseer. Bostonian says far less about the second slave, Gordon, whom he describes as the “sable youth clad in variegate and torn garments and whose likeness also appeared at the same time in *Harper’s Weekly*.”³³

³³ *New York Tribune*, 3 December 1863.

Several elements of Bostonian's account conform with that provided in *Harper's Weekly*. He notes, for instance, that the fugitive slaves were "chased by 'hunters' with their savage pack of hounds;" however, except for the unfortunate John, they evaded them by swimming "through every stream they could find," and rubbing "every portion of their body with onions and strong-scented weeds, in order to elude the trail of the bloodhounds." On other points, however, they differ significantly. The *Harper's* article claimed that the whipping occurred at Christmas, while Bostonian claimed it was "two months before Christmas." *Harper's* claimed that the subject of the scourged back image was from Mississippi, while Bostonian claims he was from Louisiana. Bostonian also omits any mention of black military service, a prominent element in the *Harper's* article.

The most significant feature of the Bostonian letter is its revelation that Peter and Gordon were two distinct individuals, and not, as some historians have claimed, alternate names for the same individual. According to Bostonian, Gordon was featured in the leftmost image in the triptych, "a negro slave sitting for his photograph, clad in the peculiar and ragged nondescript habiliments of the plantation, tattered, torn, and barefoot," while the central image of the scourged back depicted Peter. The veracity of Bostonian's account is supported by the copy of the scourged back image in the National Archives, whose inscription provides the name of the subject (Peter) and of the overseer (Carrier).

If the Bostonian letter helps to clarify many of the muddy elements behind the scourged back image, it also creates new questions. At several points during his letter, Bostonian refers to two photographs that he passed on to *Harper's*, clearly describing the left and center images of the triptych. He notes that "there appeared in *Harper's Weekly Journal of Civilization* two excellent illustrations," and that he had provided "the original photographs from which the two faithful engravings in *Harper's Weekly* were copied." Bostonian takes no notice of the existence of the right image in the triptych entirely, an image for which no

surviving photograph remains. Bostonian apparently wrote his letter without the *Harper's Weekly* article in front of him, as he begins his letter with uncertainty about the date the images appeared in the newspaper, believing them to have been published “during the latter part of June, or first of July.” His omission of any discussion of the triptych’s third image suggests that he was not the source of this image. One possibility is that the third image was fabricated by Vincent Colyer to mirror the first image in the triptych. While impossible to prove, the fabrication of the image labelled “Gordon in his uniform” would help to support the narrative elements in “A Typical Negro” about Gordon’s experience as a soldier. Its fabrication would also allow *Harper's* to employ the evolutionary trope of slave to soldier that Carole Emberton has described so powerfully. Although the image may have played a powerful role in persuading the Northern public about the merits of emancipation and the enlistment of black soldiers, it did so at the expense of the individual experiences of the real Gordon and Peter.³⁴

The ways in which the image of the scourged back was disseminated in 1863 and used over the century and a half since it appeared in *Harper's Weekly* can be revealing. The image arrived in New York as a CDV in May 1863 at a low point in popular support for the war effort. Recognizing the image’s emotional power in dramatizing the brutality of slavery, abolitionists sought to use it to rally public flagging public sentiment. Publishers of illustrated newspapers, such as *Harper's Weekly*, would have seen the image’s value as well, not only to bolster the Union cause (which *Harper's* supported enthusiastically) and emancipation (where their enthusiasm was lukewarm at best), but primarily to have the image in print prior to its rivals, most notably *Frank Leslie's Illustrated*. The appearance of the “scourged back” in *Harper's*, flanked by images of a separate individual (one of which may have been

³⁴ Carole Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 102-104.

fabricated) and accompanied by a partially invented narrative, therefore, served the interests of both abolitionists and publishers at a critical moment in the battle for Northern public opinion. Both Vincent Colyer, the presumptive author and illustrator, and the editors at *Harper's* had incentives to create a narrative to accompany the image. It was too powerful an image at too critical a time not to.