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Somewhere Toward Freedom: Sherman's March and the History of Emancipation

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Abstract

Somewhere Toward Freedom: Sherman's March and the History of Emancipation

Bennett Parten

2022

When William Tecumseh Sherman's army marched through Georgia in the last full year of the American Civil War, it didn't march alone. As many, if not more, than 20,000 freed refugees from slavery marched along at the army's rear. This dissertation tells their story. It argues that Sherman's fateful March to the Sea represented not just an important military campaign, but the largest emancipation event in American history. It also follows the refugee experience on to the shores of Georgia and South Carolina, showing how the army's arrival in Savannah and this emerging refugee crisis shaped some of the major questions of Reconstruction.

Somewhere Toward Freedom: Sherman's March and the History of Emancipation

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

Of

Yale University

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Bennett Haley Parten

Dissertation Director: David W. Blight

May 2022

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For Hannah, Zero, and My Parents.

Table of Contents

1. Prologue.....3-12

2. The View from Atlanta.....13-53

3. The Politics of the Plantation.....54-104

4. On the March.....105-153

5. The Pivot to Port Royal.....154-202

6. The Savannah Winter.....203-246

7. Port Royal and Beyond.....247-293

8. Epilogue.....293-299

“Three characteristic things one might have seen in Sherman’s raid through Georgia, which threw the new situation in shadowy relief: The Conqueror, the Conquered, and the Negro. Some see all the significance in the grim front of the Destroyer, and some in the bitter sufferers of the Lost Cause, but to me neither soldier nor fugitive speaks with so deep a meaning as that dark human cloud that clung like remorse on the rear of those swift columns, swelling at time to half their size, almost engulfing and choking them. In vain they were ordered back, in vain were bridges hewn beneath their feet; on they trudged and writhed and surged, until they rolled into Savannah, a starved and naked horde of tens of thousands...”

-W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

“When the sound of this cloud reached them, it was like nothing they had ever heard in their lives. It was not fearsomely heaven-made, like thunder or lightning or howling wind, but something felt through their feet, a resonance, as if the earth was humming...”

-E.L. Doctorow, *The March*

Prologue

In the late fall of 1864, as William Sherman’s army marched toward Savannah, Sally, a freed woman, roamed the camps at night searching for her children. Ever since she and her husband, Ben, joined the army and started off on the March to the Sea, she had been asking everyone she met for “any clue” into her children’s whereabouts. When she came to freed people who fled to army lines and joined the march just like her, she would stop, scan their faces, and scrutinize them closely, hoping that by sheer chance she might detect some distinguishing feature—a smile, a scar, or basic mannerism, something only a mother would know and never forget. Her evening rounds became a camp ritual. Everyone knew of her search, even the soldiers, though most knew that enslaved people were bought and sold with such frequency that she might as well have been searching for a “needle in a haystack.” In fact, all Sally knew was that ten years ago one of her children, her eight-year-old daughter Nan, had been sold down to the “lower country,” and she believed Nan might still be down there yet. Late one evening, as the army neared Savannah, Sally got the news she’d been hoping for. A friend told her he’d heard someone call their wife Nan and that the woman just might be her daughter. Struck by the news, Sally stopped what she was doing, praised God, and did what any mother would do. She started running.¹

Sally and her husband Ben had both been enslaved in Georgia, probably somewhere near Atlanta. Little else is known about them except that earlier that fall their lives changed forever. General William Tecumseh Sherman’s months-long campaign for Atlanta concluded in a decisive federal victory. The city was now occupied by the U.S. army, which meant it had

¹ John Potter, *Reminiscences of the Civil War in the United States* (Oskaloosa, IA: The Globe Presses, 1897), 109.

become a refuge for enslaved men and women residing on plantations within its vicinity, men and women just like Ben and Sally. So sometime that fall, the two took flight. They escaped to Atlanta, enjoyed a brief taste of freedom, and then immediately found work laboring for the army. Ben became a wagon driver for the headquarters of the Twentieth Army Corps; Sally became a cook for one of the officers. When it came time for the army to move out of Atlanta in early November, they decided to go along. Perhaps they thought that camp life might make for a more secure freedom, but they must have also known that their journey could take them toward Savannah, to that place called the “lower country,” where they might reunite with their long-lost daughter.²

Little did either Ben or Sally know that in marching off with Sherman’s army, they would take part in the largest emancipation event in American history. In the coming days and weeks, the army would march close to 60,000 men overland from Atlanta to Savannah in what’s known as Sherman’s March to the Sea. Though neither Sherman nor any of his men had any desire to turn their march into a march of liberation, the enslaved certainly did. From the very start and at every stop along the way, enslaved people fled plantations and rushed off into the army’s path. Men and women arrived at night or during the day. They came as families or as lone escapees. And some made long, circuitous journeys while others simply met the soldiers out on the main road—or right there in the shadow of their homes. The movement was unlike anything anyone had ever seen. Soldiers described it as being practically providential. Enslaved people did too. They hailed the soldiers as angels of the Lord and celebrated the army’s arrival as if it was the start of something prophetic, as if God himself had ordained the war and the days of revelation had arrived.

² Ibid.

Some of the men and women who ran to the army took the occasion to do just as Ben and Sally had done and marched along. Indeed, wherever the army went—on every plantation, homestead, and at roadsides in between—enslaved people packed their bundles, said their good-byes, and marched off with Sherman’s men. Some found work, often as cooks, laundresses, or laborers, and thus marched along with main columns; but the vast majority traveled along somewhere at the army’s rear, with long lines of freed people sometimes stretching well out into the Georgia countryside. Mostly on-foot and with little to eat or stem the cold of a Georgia winter, these men and women became wartime refugees, and as Sherman pushed his massive federal army toward Savannah, they would soon swell the army’s lines, becoming the central actors in an ongoing drama: the freed refugees pressed into the army, laid claims on the March, and ultimately transformed the campaign into a defining moment in the history of American freedom.

Hence, this dissertation’s title, for by the time Sherman and his men arrived on the coast, as many as twenty thousand freed people followed—all marching, as one soldier would write, “somewhere toward freedom.”³

*

The story of Sherman’s March has never been told quite like this. Instead, for much of the twentieth century the question has been whether Sherman’s March represented an early instance of “total war”—or, said differently, whether Sherman’s ‘hard-war’ policies previewed the civilian horrors of the Second World War. Most scholars now see the issue as mostly settled. Hard as Sherman wanted to make the war, he never outright targeted civilians, and his March was never as dreadfully horrific as, say, the Bombing of Dresden or the Rape of Nanjing. Yet for

³ James Austin Connolly, *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland: The Letters and Diary of Major James A. Connolly*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), 311.

decades the question has nonetheless loomed so large that it's practically sucked all the air out of the room. To write about Sherman's March has thus been to write about warfare; it's been to focus on the soldiers, or Sherman, or how he endeavored to "make war so terrible" that generations would pass before the South ever appealed to it again. As a result, we've only ever imagined the March as a military campaign and have likewise only encountered it as a matter of military history.⁴

One of the principal contentions of this book, however, is that this focus on the overtly military aspects of the March has kept us from seeing it for what it truly was, a veritable freedom movement. This was clearly how enslaved people saw things. From the moment Sherman moved out of Atlanta, enslaved people in corners and hamlets across Georgia appraised the situation, knowing that where the army went freedom went also. Not for nothing, after all, did tens-of-thousands of enslaved people travel down roads and footpaths and creek beds in an attempt to get to the army; and not for nothing did so many enslaved people march on for days and weeks, maybe even a month or more, at the rear of Sherman's army, sometimes enduring incredible hardship and heartbreak just to get to where the army was going. But it wasn't just how enslaved people moved; it was how the army moved as well. The way the army marched—its speed, its breadth, and the intensity with which it broke the back of the planter class—cut out a space deep in the heart of Georgia wide enough for enslaved people to begin imagining freedom as something real, as something coming within their grasp, and as something that existed within the

⁴ "Total War" was first applied to Sherman's march in a *Journal of Southern History* article by John Bennett Walters. See John Bennett Walters, "General William T. Sherman and Total War," *The Journal of Southern History* 14, no. 4 (1948): 447–80.; John Bennett Walters, *Merchant of Terror: General Sherman and Total War* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973). Recent scholarship, however, suggests that Sherman's March and the Civil War at large was not a display of total war. See Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).; Mark E. Neely, "Was the Civil War a Total War?," *Civil War History* 50, no. 4 (2004): 434–58. On the Sherman quote, see his letter to Grant from Vicksburg in *O.R.* Ser. 1. Vol. XVII, 261.

path of the March. This underlying mix of movement, momentum, and meaning defined the entire campaign.

Another key contention has to do with the March's aftermath. We oftentimes think of Sherman's March as simply the Savannah Campaign—meaning the roughly two-hundred-and-fifty-mile march from Atlanta to Savannah in November and December of 1864. But the problem with this general view is that it only captures the half of it. It obscures what happened in January and February and therefore misses the fact that Sherman's March set off a sprawling refugee crisis along the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. The crisis began as an attempt to resettle the freed refugees at a federal outpost on the South Carolina Sea Islands and ended in tragedy: men and women died from sickness and exposure; freed people landed in places ill-equipped to help them; and thousands of people found themselves experiencing freedom in what were effectively foreign lands, in places far from home and in environments they didn't want to be in. What this dissertation does that's new is put these two stories together. It combines a history of Sherman's March with a full accounting of its aftermath, showing that those long winter months on the coast were just as consequential as the army's march down the dusty roads south of Atlanta.

These arguments naturally point to the dissertation's third major claim— that Sherman's March represented a turning point in the history of American freedom. I mean this, on the one hand, in a very real and grassroots sense: Sherman's March was the largest emancipation event in our history—and one of the largest in the entire rise and fall of Atlantic slavery. The army's movements from Atlanta to Savannah channeled enormous force, enough to destroy Georgia's slave system, pummel the planter class, and bring freedom to some untold thousands of enslaved people; not only that but the collective movement of so many enslaved people—first *to* the army

and then *behind* the army—had the same effect. It dismantled slavery from within, undermined the Confederate project, and most of all, kept the idea of freedom at the front and center of all the army's movements, which helped make the March a moment in which the very fate of the nation swung in a new direction. In fact, one way to understand the March and its overall importance is that it did *in effect* what the Emancipation Proclamation could only do on paper.

And yet, on the other hand, I mean this in a much larger and perhaps more abstract sense. The best way to describe it is that the March was, as Sherman himself once put it, like “a good-fitting wedge.” Because the army moved with such overwhelming force and because the freed refugees followed the army as they did, the combination of the two produced implications and after-effects that expanded out from the source. Some of these effects were more political in nature, having to do with emancipation on a national level; others were more humanitarian and had to do with the fate of the freed refugees. In either case, the result was a series of downstream twists and turns that set the agenda for our post-war Reconstruction. The history of the Freedman's Bureau, the origins of land reform, and indeed the very meaning of freedom all have plot points or storylines that point back to the March or its aftermath. Though the March is typically seen as one of the last campaigns of the Civil War, the underlying truth is that it was also one of the earliest battles of Reconstruction, a wartime crucible that went on shaping American society well after it was over.

*

If these are the dissertation's three major arguments, let me also offer a central thread by way of a metaphor. Over and over, in soldiers' letters and diaries, in war reminiscences and in official military reports, freed people expressed themselves through the idea of *Jubilee!* It was the idiom of the age, the metaphor of emancipation, and it bounced like choral notes above the

rough sounds of a marching army. Freed people celebrated Sherman's arrival in Savannah by singing the songs of Jubilee— often “The Year of Jubilee” or the “Jubilee Hymn”—and out on roads and along cart-paths everywhere freed people hailed the army with heaps of praise, saying, as one did, “Bless the Lord, Thanks to the Almighty God, the Yanks is come, the Day of Jubilee has arrived.” Soldiers claimed it too and recognized that in marching through Georgia they were taking part in something epic, something that would change the order of history, which is why when the Northern composer Henry Clay Work sat down to salute the march in song, he did so by writing the lyrics “*Hurrah! Hurrah! We Bring the Jubilee! Hurrah! Hurrah! The Flag that makes you free. So we sang the chorus from Atlanta to the Sea. While we were marching through Georgia...*”⁵

Yet if this idea of Jubilee pervaded the March, it was hardly hollow. Drawn from deep in the Old Testament, the idea describes a moment of rapture and release. According to its biblical origins, it was a time when society renewed itself, a foreordained year when enslaved people were freed, large estates were broken down, debts were absolved, and fields went fallow for a full year while the earth regenerated itself. Sometime between days of Leviticus and the firing on Fort Sumter, the idea developed a more apocalyptic edge. It came to describe something prophetic and millennial, and it became synonymous with ideas of universal emancipation, a time when the world would make itself anew. Americans of every creed and color knew of this idea, but enslaved people in particular embraced it as a self-evident truth, believing that one day God would right the world of all its wrongs and start by freeing them for all posterity. It therefore developed special meaning within the world of the enslaved as a vision of

⁵ See T.W. Connelly, *History of the Seventieth Ohio Regiment: From its Organization to its Mustering Out* (Cincinnati, OH: Peake Bros, 1902), 131; Henry Clay Work, *Songs of Henry Clay Work* comp. Bertram G. Work (New York: Little and Ives, 1920).

emancipation, and nowhere within the wide landscape of the war did this vision ring as loud or as true as on the March.

Thus what Lincoln described on a crowded platform at Gettysburg as the nation's "new birth of freedom," enslaved people all across Georgia celebrated as their "day of Jubilee," and this is why the idea represents such a powerful and appropriate metaphor. Refugees leave few sources; testimonies from freed people are few and far between. Despite the wealth of writing about the Civil War, sources detailing how freed people felt about freedom, how they imagined it, and what it meant to them are sometimes hard to come by. The idea of Jubilee helps us fill in the gaps. It tells us that freed people imagined their emancipation as having world historical significance, as being rooted in ideas of rebirth and divine justice, and as pointing us toward a new dawning of freedom that would mend the sins of American slavery. In that sense, this ages-old idea of Jubilee represents an overarching metaphor for our Civil War, reminding us that underneath all the blood and gore, beneath the banners and flags, and despite all the myth and legend, the Civil War represented a redefinition of American freedom largely led and articulated by formerly enslaved people.

The simple fact that the idea of Jubilee came to characterize Sherman's March to the Sea only underscores just how crucial the campaign was to both these processes—to the lived reality of emancipation as well as this larger redefinition of freedom. So as a message from me, the author, to you, the reader, look for it when you read: Hear it, see it, and know that as a metaphor, it embodies one of the central threads of our history and one of the deepest meanings of our Civil War.

*

Sally may have even had Jubilee’s promise in mind when she dropped her things and praised God after hearing the news of the woman named Nan. We don’t really know. All we know is that within the blink of an eye Sally “flew to where they were.” The campfires lit the way. She ran past soldiers and tents, probably swatted away shouts and jeers, and might have grabbed the wrong person once or twice. When she finally got near enough, the woman believed to be Nan stopped and stared at Sally. Sally stared back. The two didn’t know what to say or do; a decade had passed since Sally had seen her daughter, and her daughter was just eight the last time she saw her mother. It wasn’t until the woman said that she used to live near Atlanta as a young girl that Sally felt sure it was Nan. She called Nan her child and said she’d been looking for her all this time. Then came the tears. Eyes welled up. They hugged and kissed. They screamed. Friends cheered as soldiers watched, and the entire camp erupted in a riotous commotion. Sally then went to get Ben and the whole scene repeated itself. The soldier who later narrated the reunion called it “the most powerful demonstration of human emotion” he’d ever seen.⁶

Sally and Nan enjoyed their tearful reunion while marching along with Sherman’s army. They were, however, only two of maybe as many as twenty-thousand. Not everyone had this experience. The idea of Jubilee may have promised a radical rebirth, may have promised a new awakening of sorts, but it also called forth more apocalyptic ideas of upheaval and strife. The reality of the March—of having 60,000 soldiers march to the sea in the final full year of a bloody Civil War—is that it often represented less of the former and more of the latter. It was loud, chaotic, and always dangerous. Violence, or the threat of, lingered around every bend in the road. Freedom—or something like it—was often more uncertain than certain, and calamity was never

⁶ Potter, *Reminiscences of the Civil War in the United States*, 111.

all that far behind. The March represented the war's most revolutionary moment, an instance where the ground shook, tumult ensued, and freed people everywhere started realizing freedom as never before. But revolutions can sometimes go backward. They often turn tragic. And by the end of 1865, after the war's end and a full year after the March, this story, sadly, would as well.

Chapter 1:

The View from Atlanta

Monemia was a free woman of color who kept a shop—a grocery by day and saloon by night—in Marietta, Georgia. Her husband, known only as Mr. Johnson, was an enslaved man with steady hands and a steely disposition—qualities that made him a first-rate barber and an excellent spy. In late 1863, as the Civil War swirled around Chattanooga, Mr. Johnson did all his espionage from behind his barber's chair. He trimmed the beards of Confederate officers and enlisted men. Braxton Bragg, then the overall commander of Confederate forces in Georgia, was once even a customer. Little did these loose-lipped soldiers know that as Mr. Johnson cropped and combed, he also listened and learned. He memorized place names, troop movements, and casualty counts; he ran the details over in his head once, twice, three, and four times more, all while working his scissors and straight razor with speed and skill. It was a risk. He knew that. But he nevertheless reported what he heard to an agent of the U.S. army, who then relayed the

information on to the high brass at Chattanooga. On several occasions Mr. Johnson even personally journeyed behind the lines—and on one of those trips he met with General George Thomas, the famed “Rock of Chickamauga.” What Johnson told Thomas was valuable: Bragg was being reinforced, intelligence that Monemia believed won the battle of Chattanooga for the Union.⁷

Only a year or so later, by the fall of 1864, everything had changed. Sherman’s federal army invaded Georgia in the spring, captured Atlanta in September, and was now preparing for its March to the Sea. Meanwhile, Mr. Johnson was on the run. Earlier that year he had his cover blown, which led him to flee first to Chattanooga then on to Nashville, where he found refuge in a camp there. Maybe this was a formal military camp? Possibly. More than likely, however, this was a refugee camp, an institution that by 1864 dotted the landscape of the American Civil War. These shoddy, make-shift accommodations were the wartime answer to the many thousands of enslaved men and women who fled slavery for the presumed safety of U.S. army lines. Under-resourced and ignored, the camps festered with disease, becoming the epicenter of what one historian has described as the “largest biological crisis of the nineteenth century.” And indeed sometime in March of the following year, mere weeks before the end of the war, Mr. Johnson contracted small-pox and died.⁸

Monemia, for her part, had also been displaced. When Sherman’s army pushed out of Atlanta in November, 1864 and embarked on its march through Georgia, a band of U.S. cavalymen arrived at her door in Marietta. The men, probably some drunk and still frothing

⁷ Testimony of Monemia Johnson, Nov. 6. 1872, Claim of Monemia Johnson, Marietta, Cobb County, Georgia, box 142, Approved Claims, Ser. 732, Records of the Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 217, National Archives.

⁸ Ibid.; Jim Downs, *Sick From Freedom: African American Illness and Suffering in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

from setting parts of the small city on fire, knew that Monemia ran a successful grocery and saloon and thus had plenty of dry goods and live spirits. They said they had orders to procure what was of military necessity and would resign themselves to only that, but as Monemia later testified, the men took to pillaging. They took everything: one hundred pounds of bacon, five hundred pounds of rice, twenty gallons of wine, forty gallons of syrup, seven sets of bedding, four turkeys, twelve ducks, five hogs, and three cows. They even took off with all of her furniture and every piece of jewelry she had, bringing the total loss, she guessed, to something in the range of two-thousand dollars. The attack ruined her professionally and left her with nothing. As the fire burned through town the rest of the night, it torched her two properties, sending all she had up in flames.⁹

When Monemia finally told her story in 1871 it was as part of an ambitious undertaking launched by the federal government. Six years after a war that left at least 850,000 Americans dead and devastated communities far and wide, federal agents with the Southern Claims Commission sought to compensate loyal—emphasis on *loyal*—citizens for property confiscated or destroyed by the U.S. army. It was an attempt at restitution, though Monemia knew the agents could never account for all that had been lost. Nevertheless, she filed a claim and gave her testimony. She told the agent in charge that she had been loyal to the U.S. government, that she supported the Union because she knew it was right, and she told him all about how Mr. Johnson had been a spy. She told him, too, about how she invested all her “Confederate money in property, [and] supplies, trusting,” she said, “the protection of the United States Army.” And she told him about the night she lost everything, listing all her valuables (even the turnips) in as

⁹ Testimony of Monemia Johnson, Nov. 6. 1872, Claim of Monemia Johnson, Marietta, Cobb County, Georgia, box 142, Approved Claims, Ser. 732, Records of the Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 217, National Archives.

much detail as she could muster, and how in the years since, she built a small cottage and started teaching school in exchange for her bread. In return, the agent of the Southern Claims Commission, a federal body, gave her two hundred and fifty dollars for her trouble and sent her on her way.¹⁰

The invasion of Georgia in the spring of 1864 was a decisive moment in the American Civil War. The movement out of the mountains and into the heart of Georgia toppled Atlanta and opened the door to the rest of the state, leaving William Tecumseh Sherman free to make his March to the Sea. Yet for all its strategic importance, the Atlanta campaign was also a critical moment in the private lives of Monemia and Mr. Johnson. The federal army's push for Atlanta put Mr. Johnson on the run, which led to his early death. Similarly, for Monemia, the Atlanta Campaign separated her from her husband, destroyed her livelihood, and displaced her just the same. Now, you aren't likely to find Monemia or Mr. Johnson on any war memorials; their names won't be written in marble or sandstone. But their lives and their losses are examples of how the war that razed the state of Georgia wasn't a war that abided by battlefields or concerned just two clashing armies. Instead, it was a war that engulfed, inflamed, and included African Americans like Monemia and Mr. Johnson, providing a powerful precedent for the campaign that would come next.

*

The campaign for Atlanta began with a fateful change of command. In March of 1864, President Abraham Lincoln gave Ulysses S. Grant, the recent victor of Chattanooga, command of all U.S. forces. Lincoln needed a man that would fight, and fight is what Grant intended to do. He used his promotion as an opening for devising a new strategy. Heretofore, the fighting

¹⁰ Ibid.

revolved around capturing capital cities or valuable transportation hubs, so-called “strategic points.” Grant’s experience in the West—marked by the bloody victory at Shiloh and the long siege of Vicksburg—convinced him that capturing such points deflected resources away from what he recognized as the fundamental reality of the war: defeating the Confederacy meant defeating Confederate armies. What he envisioned instead was a strategy that placed greater pressure on the Confederacy and its war making capacity by coordinating Union advances in both the east and the west. The goal was to pursue the enemy, not just key cities or rail hubs, and mobilize the full force of the federal army’s numerical advantage until Confederate armies in the field had nowhere else to turn. To see the plan through, Grant personally took command in the east, where he sought to coordinate the two theaters while engaging Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia.¹¹

Grant’s move east elevated Sherman to command in the west. While slightly older than Grant, Sherman was one of Grant’s trusted subordinates. The two had served alongside each other since the start of the war and developed a relationship that went beyond mutual respect and admiration. It was real friendship. Grant relied on Sherman for reinforcements and supplies during his early assault on Fort Donaldson in 1862, and from there on the two ruffled generals supported each other—on the battlefield as well as in the fearsome politics of high command, where intrigue and scandal threatened to undermine them both. “Give Grant all the help you can,” Sherman wrote to his brother, United States Senator John Sherman, while Grant visited Washington prior to joining the army in Virginia, adding “He will expect it. We are close friends.” The original plans for the invasion of Georgia, which both Grant and Sherman hashed

¹¹ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 721-722.

out in Cincinnati hotel room in the late March of 1864, rested on the strength of this friendship and the trust the two men had in each other as much as it did any specific plan of battle. Sherman would later write that the idea was simple: “He was to go for Lee and I was to go for Joe Johnston,” the seasoned commander standing between him and Atlanta. “That was his [Grant’s] plan. No routes prescribed,” Sherman remembered, calling the campaign “the end of the beginning.”¹²

Bear in mind, however, that the Georgia Sherman and Grant strategized over as they laid out their plans in the spring of 1864 was not the same state that seceded from the Union four years prior. Though Georgia experienced little fighting in the years before the invasion, the war still reshuffled communities far and wide. The first jolt came early, in 1861, when federal gunboats launched attacks off the Georgia coast. The fighting, while brief and mostly bloodless, touched off a reaction that sent the region’s wealthy white families careening into the safety of the state’s interior. In the coming years, these so-called “white refugees” would welcome plenty of company as thousands of likeminded exiles fled into the state from all corners of the South. Some sixty families from New Orleans alone relocated to Lagrange, a small town in west-central Georgia, and in Atlanta, refugees so inundated the city that local churches began labeling pews with the names of Southern states. All this moving and relocating gave Confederate Georgia a different look and feel from its pre-war predecessor. Indeed, three years in and the war had

¹² William T. Sherman to John Sherman, March 24, 1864 in Brooks. D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin, eds., *Sherman’s Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 610; *Report of the Proceedings of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee at the Twenty-First Meeting, held Cincinnati, Ohio, Sept. 5-6, 1888*, Sherman Speech at the 22nd meeting, pg. 316. Also Quoted in James Lee McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country: An American Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 461. See also, Charles Braclean Flood, *Grant and Sherman: The Friendship that Won the Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

garbled the state's social geography, making it an *ad hoc* and highly transient shell of its antebellum self.¹³

Another result was that as these white families moved, they often forced enslaved people to move with them, which launched a widespread uprooting of enslaved communities throughout Georgia and the wider South. Take Charles Colcock Jones, Jr.—a pastor, planter, and possessor of over one hundred and twenty enslaved people spread across three plantations on the Georgia coast—as an example. In the summer of 1862, Jones—a Christian paternalist, who saw himself as a kind and gentle master—initiated one of these painful Sunderings as he prepped his family for a move into central Georgia. Though he didn't intend on splitting any families up, his move had a complication in that some of the people he enslaved were members of an island community which included spouses and blood-kin on neighboring plantations owned by other families. To move at all was to break these bonds and rip the center out of not just a community, but an entire island culture that had been formed and reformed through more than a century of slavery along Georgia's coast.¹⁴

In the end, the Jones's never actually fled for the interior, but Charles still sent his enslaved people away from their homes. Of the one hundred and twenty-nine people he enslaved, he marched a little over half off to his new cotton plantation in east-central Georgia and kept the rest behind on his coastal plantations—a move that split Stepney, a carriage driver, from Daddy Robin, his father, and split Porter from his wife Patience and their young children.

¹³ Lee Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia: The Story of Soldiers and Civilians During Sherman's Campaign* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 24. See also, Clarence L. Mohr, *On the Threshold of Freedom: Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia* (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 2001).

¹⁴ See, Erskine Clark, *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 413-419. See also, Mohr, *On the Threshold of Freedom*, 103-105.

Making matters even worse was that Jones insisted on keeping his coastal plantations in working order, which meant spreading the remaining families out across three separate plantations and dividing them further. These places were not that far from each other, so families could sometimes find some semblance of community. But even then, the move disrupted longstanding attachments to a place, a home, a community, and a still thriving culture of low-country traditions. As more white families moved, devastating disruptions like these happened with greater frequency.¹⁵

Ironically enough, the pressures forcing these painful separations were often the same pressures simultaneously weakening Georgia's slave system. The waning patterns of work due to the war, the want of fighting men at the front, and the disruptions caused by white families exiling themselves elsewhere all combined to erode plantation discipline and break down traditional systems of oversight and control. For their part, enslaved people had also begun to recognize that the war was creating new opportunities to either resist enslavement or escape it entirely. Initially, it was the low-country where these cleavages opened the widest. The sound of the U.S. navy blasting its guns off Georgia's coast in 1861 echoed throughout the region's web-like waterways, and as soon as the navy made landfall, enslaved people started slipping off into the night, piloting themselves down rivers and stowing themselves away on deserted islands until able to reach the federal navy. Several enslaved men and women owned by the Jones family fled during these early days of the war, no doubt following this same path toward the coast. Others likely absconded once the evacuations began, using the chaos and commotion of fleeing white families as cover for their escape.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., 417.

¹⁶ Mohr, *On the Threshold of Freedom*, 108-109; Clarke, *Dwelling Place*, 414-415.

By 1864, however, a second, far larger front in this war between slaveholders and enslaved people opened in and around Atlanta. Unlike Savannah, an old colonial port city, whose ornate verandas and neatly designed town squares housed the planter-barons of the Georgia low-country, Atlanta was little more than a precocious railroad hub when the war began. Yet once the war came, the city had its upstarting growth hastened by two internal transformations: The first was social and had to do with the exiled families turning Atlanta into a cosmopolitan hub for displaced Southerners; the second was industrial and had to do with efforts to turn the city into a Confederate citadel and arms producing mecca. The force behind this second, more industrial transformation was the popular practice of “hiring-out” enslaved men to work in the city, which saw thousands of Black men impressed into either constructing Confederate fortifications or producing armaments for the war. These were brutal, backbreaking labors, but they were also labors that placed enslaved people in urban environments away from those who held them in bondage, which created more opportunities to either abscond into the anonymity of back alleys or slip off in the night. And by the summer of 1864, with Sherman’s army on the move, being hired out in Atlanta or its vicinity meant a potential chance at escaping north in the direction of Sherman’s invading army.¹⁷

Guiding enslaved people in their efforts to either resist or escape was the knowledge that the war was also not the same as it was only a year or so ago. The most dramatic change occurred on the first of January, 1863—the day President Lincoln formally issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Though but a brief, tersely-written document, the President’s proclamation changed the meaning of the war by formalizing a revolution the enslaved had

¹⁷ Clarence L. Mohr, “The Atlanta Campaign and the African American Experience in Civil War Georgia” in Lesley J. Gordon, John C. Inscoe, eds. *Inside the Confederate Nation: Essays in Honor of Emory M. Thomas* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2005), 272-294. See also, Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 117-118.

already unleashed: For all across the south enslaved people had been sizing their freedom by fleeing to the presumed freedom of U.S. army lines. This mass exodus began as soon as the war started and gradually over two years forced the U.S. government into recognizing the necessity, if not reality, of wartime emancipation. The Emancipation Proclamation mattered in the wide scope of the war because it announced the full of arc of this shift by making emancipation an official war aim.¹⁸

What this meant in theory was that enslaved people who fled to army lines were no longer considered “contrabands of war”—or, in other words, requisitioned property, which is how the U.S. government previously defined them. They were, instead, “thenceforth and forever” free men and women, a momentous change that immediately freed thousands of enslaved people located within federally occupied parts of the South. What this meant on the ground was perhaps even more profound. By making freedom a federal promise, the Emancipation Proclamation invited enslaved people all over the South to run to the army, which further legitimized their ongoing revolution from within. As important, in making military emancipation an official government policy, the Emancipation Proclamation gave those massive federal armies a government-backed mandate to reach deep into the belly of the South and pursue emancipation to the fullest extent possible—which practically confirmed their status as armies of liberation.¹⁹

White families knew all this as well. Thus when the army pushed out of Chattanooga and started its descent down the spine-like tracks of the Western and Atlantic Railroad toward

¹⁸ See Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

¹⁹ See Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 3-4; James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York: W.W. Norton & Sons, 2014), 370-373.

Atlanta, the pressure was enough to set off another round of forced movement in Georgia's Northwestern counties. Though this was a region of smaller plantations and fewer enslaved people, it housed the bulk of Georgia's heavy industry, which retained scores of enslaved men in extractive industries like coal and iron. Not to mention, these counties were prime landing spots for refugee families and their slaves from further South, especially from along the coast. Perhaps predictably then, when Sherman's army entered Georgia's northern door, these families joined thousands of other slave-owning Georgians in flights away from the war, prompting a long and forced march of hundreds, if not thousands, of enslaved people south to Atlanta or even further south to central and southwestern Georgia. Ironically, as this caravan of men and women moved south, the Confederate army began impressing enslaved men into service and sending them north to those same northern counties, where the men dug trenches, built breastworks, and performed all sorts of grueling military labor—anything that might slow the federal advance. The result was a vicious and prolonged cycle of forced movement that jerked enslaved men and women up and down the state.²⁰

The pressure of having two massive armies tussling about in Northern Georgia exacerbated this cycle even as it triggered the slow unraveling of Georgia's slave system. The first signs of slavery's slow demise appeared in the form of empty plantations. "Most of the families had fled. All the able-bodied negroes, men and women, had been carried off," reported David Power Conyngham, an Irish-born war correspondent for the *New York Herald*. This was the case across Georgia's northwestern corner. From Rossville and Ringgold in the north to Rome and Kingston further south, this peaceful piedmont region of rolling hills and quiet springs

²⁰ Clarence L. Mohr, "The Atlanta Campaign and the African American Experience in Civil War Georgia," 73-275.

had all been “pretty well deserted.” Other signs appeared in the shape of abandoned coal and ironworks. As one soldier with the Seventh Iowa reported, a Mr. G.W. Smith, the owner of a large foundry in Etowah, removed his entire operation, including the people he enslaved, in advance of Sherman’s invasion. The war that had given these industries life was now tearing them asunder, forcing mine and factory owners to remobilize where possible—often first in Atlanta, then on to Macon, then on to distant places in Alabama and Mississippi as the army moved further into Georgia.²¹

Why so many families fled had a lot to do with the kind of fighting that followed the armies down from Chattanooga. While there were pitched battles at places like Resaca in May and Kennesaw Mountain in June, both which were bloody affairs with the dead and wounded totaling in the thousands, the fighting more often resembled a rolling motion in which each army tried to outflank the other, resulting in continuous fighting and random bursts of energy—indeed, Sherman later described the campaign as one long “battle of Georgia.” This mix of unremitting engagement and constant counter movements meant that the force of the war was never concentrated on any one area. Rather, it spread out across the countryside, lurching onto farms and plantations across the region. Mounted cavalry fights broke out in backyards, and retreating Confederates confiscated their way toward slowing the federal advance. Similarly, foragers from *both sides* descended upon plantations and homesteads, picking them clean of food, stock, wagons, and other valuables. At other times, when the war swarmed in close, plantation homes themselves became thrown together field hospitals or even targets of attack, which meant that

²¹ Ibid.; David Power Conyngham, *Sherman’s March Through the South with Sketches and Incidents of the Campaign* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1865), 68, 73; H.I. Smith, *History of the Seventh Iowa Veteran Volunteer Infantry During the Civil War* (Mason City, Iowa: E. Hitchcock, printer, 1902), 137.

this hard war was only getting harder, and the more it rolled toward Atlanta, the more invasive it became.²²

Yet perhaps the most profound sign of slavery's slow unraveling appeared on roadsides and river-crossings wherever the army moved. Not every plantation had been evacuated. There were still slave-owning whites in the area, which meant there were still enslaved people in the area, and none were immune from a war that swept across the countryside: enslaved men and women faced death, impressment, and abduction. Many, in fact, had been seized by white owners and carried off into the woods to keep from coming into contact with the army. And yet, in the face of these abuses, the enslaved still appeared behind army lines and along roadsides leading the way toward Atlanta. Some came from miles away; others simply met the army as it marched past. There were others as well that took an active role in the fighting, much like the two men who guided a federal division during an assault on Rome. The soldiers couldn't help but notice them. How could they not? Startling scenes along the lines of march confronted them, shocked them, and began revealing just what emancipation might mean. One Indiana soldier remembered being viscerally moved when he witnessed an enslaved man "standing along the roadside shouting at the top of his voice, thanking God that the Yankees at last had come and that he was now a free man." The "affecting" scene—to use the language of the Indiana soldier—was a sign of things still to come.²³

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²² Quoted in Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 63; See also, *Ibid*, 90-95. See also, *Albert Castel, Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992).

²³ Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 85; Richard K. Rue and Geraldine M. Rue, *In Song and Sorrow: The Daily Journal of Thomas Hart Benton McCain, 86th Indiana Volunteer Infantry* (Carmel, Indiana: Guild, 1998), 155.

The man leading this chorus of cannons down from the mountains was someone whose life has been shrouded in a cult of personality. Long reviled in the South and lauded in the North, William T. Sherman is perhaps best remembered for uttering crisp statements almost bone-chilling in their brutal honesty about waging war: “You cannot qualify war in harsher terms than I will. War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it,” he once told the mayor of Atlanta; years later he made the comment he is most known for, saying simply, “*War is hell.*”^{*} Such statements—unsparing, cold, and straightforward—are also stoic, if not intoxicating, when coming from the mouth of a conqueror, which is what Sherman became. His taking of Atlanta, his march through Georgia and the Carolinas, and the remorseless manner in which he subdued the South made him one of the most popular (and *polarizing*) figures in the nation. By war’s end, only Grant superseded him in fame, yet where Grant’s military exploits carried him to the presidency in 1868, Sherman’s carried him straight into American lore. Even today, he’s not only synonymous with hard and totalizing warfare, his name alone lives deep in the cultural memory of the American South, a reminder that a powerful federal army once prostrated the region into submission.²⁴

It wasn’t always so. A native of Lancaster, Ohio, William Tecumseh Sherman—his middle name coming from his father’s respect for the Shawnee warrior, Tecumseh—was someone who spent his life tormented by the thought of ever returning to Ohio. His father, a lawyer by trade, went bankrupt and died suddenly in 1829 when Sherman was only nine years old. His mother, unable to provide for the family, had no choice but send young “Cump,” as he

²⁴ William T. Sherman to James M. Calhoun, et al. Sept. 12, 1864 in SCW, 707-708; ^{*}There is no evidence Sherman ever said this, and there is debate as to where it comes from. The most likely origin is a 1879 speech to a Michigan Military Academy, where, after speaking of the horrors of war, he described it as “all hell.” Various other versions of his speech have been published.

was known, to live with Thomas Ewing, a close friend of his father's, who would soon rise in the world of national politics. As a result, Sherman grew up enjoying all the privileges of a prominent eastern Ohio family. He was educated. He fell in love with fine arts, especially Shakespeare, and his foster father's connections opened the door to West Point, where he excelled and soon found his chosen career, this despite Thomas Ewing urging him to find something better.²⁵

Living with the Ewings all those years also introduced him to Ellen Ewing, Thomas Ewing's daughter, whom Sherman would marry. The two endured what was at times a fraught and difficult relationship. The problem wasn't love; the two had love in spades. The problem was that their marriage placed Sherman in the perpetual shadow of his wealthy father-in-law, who was not only jealous and covetous of his daughter, but also Sherman's foster father and the only father he'd ever really known. In response, Sherman spent the bulk of his pre-war career trying free himself of Ewing family patronage, all while convincing a skeptical Ellen that they could indeed make it on their own. This desire to establish himself in the world, to carve out space and leave his own mark, eventually led him out of the army and into numerous failed ventures. But from one failure to the next, one thing was certain: He never went back to Ohio for longer than a visit.²⁶

That's not all. Peel back Sherman's hard-edged persona even further and you'll find someone who spent his career dodging questions about his sanity. It started early in the war. While stationed in Louisville in late 1861, Sherman had a breakdown. He was already tired, despondent, and pessimistic about the state of the war when an ill-intentioned report published in

²⁵ See John F. Marszaleck, *Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order* (New York, Free Press, 1993), 5-10. See also, McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 38-39

²⁶ See McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 164, 172, 207, 214. See also, Marszaleck, *Sherman*, 15-16.

The New York Tribune described him as “gloomy” and accused him of overestimating enemy strength. The report plunged him into an even more manic state of madness: He began crying wolf about an all-out Confederate assault on targets in the Midwest, including Louisville, which was improbable at best, and he began to speak of “absolutely sacrificing” untrained soldiers. The situation grew so worrying that an aide wrote Ellen, who found him in such rough shape that she wrote his brother John, who tried to snap his brother out of his “strange delusions.” But it was no use. A military report declared him overstressed by the rigors of command, which led to a swift demotion. He went from commanding his own army to serving under his old friend Henry Halleck, though he never fully escaped. Whispered rumors of lunacy followed him throughout his career.²⁷

More to the point, peeling back Sherman’s cult of personality reveals him for who he really was: an inveterate white supremacist whose bullheaded views on race became hallmarks of his life and career. “All the Congresses on the earth can’t make the negro anything more than what he is; he must be subject to the white man,” he once told Ellen prior to the war. As many biographers have noted, Sherman’s racial views were not so different from the many Southerners he befriended while serving in various military posts across the South. He believed the South “inherited” the institution and felt that the American slave system was the “mildest and best regulated slave system in the world, now or heretofore.” He even mused about buying slaves while living in Louisiana, telling his brother-in-law: “Ellen will have to wait on herself or buy a

²⁷ See the report, “Secretary Cameron’s Visit to Kentucky,” *New York Tribune*, Oct. 30, 1861 (New York, New York). See also quotes from McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 286-292. On “absolutely sacrificing,” see his letter to John, Nov. 21, 1861 in Rachel Sherman Thorndike, *The Sherman Letters: Correspondence Between General and Senator Sherman, 1837-1891* (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1894) 135.; See also, Marszaleck, *Sherman*, 161-163. On newspaper reports calling him “insane,” see *Cincinnati Commercial* from December 11, 1861 in Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1932), 201.

nigger. What will you think of that—our buying niggers?” His only problem with slavery, in fact, was that it drove people into their wildest passions: southerners clung to it, and abolitionists railed against it, an impasse that hurled the country into what he believed was an avoidable war. In the end, secession, not slavery, brought him out of retirement and back into the army. “On the necessity of maintaining a government, and that government the old Constitutional one, I have never wavered,” he would write, “but I do recoil from a war, when the negro is the only question.”²⁸

Not only did Sherman not see slavery as a cause worth fighting over, he believed in neither the necessity nor the reality of wartime emancipation, arguing instead that emancipation created nothing but needless trouble for he and his men. His chief complaint was that freedom was simply an abstraction and that the burdens of dealing with emancipation fell to under-equipped men already engaged in fighting a war. “The President declares negroes free, but makes no machinery by which such freedom is assured,” he wrote his brother from Memphis, where he served as Military Governor when Lincoln issued his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September of 1862. John—a sensible and shrewd Republican aware of the shifting political winds in Washington—did his best to bring his brother around on the issue, but the elder Sherman dug in, complaining that emancipation only further complicated the war-effort. “We cannot now give tents to our soldiers and our wagon trains are a horrible

²⁸ William T. Sherman to Ellen Sherman, Nov. 29, 1860 in M.A. DeWolfe Howe, ed. *Home Letters of General Sherman* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909), 401-401; Sherman, *The Memoirs of William T. Sherman, by Himself*, 149; William T. Sherman to D.F. Boyd, April 4, 1861 in Walter L. Fleming, ed. *General W. T. Sherman as College President: A Collection of Letters, Document, and Other Material, Chiefly from Private Sources, Relating to the Life and Activities of General William Tecumseh Sherman, to the Early Years at Louisiana State University, and to the Stirring Conditions Existing in the South on the Eve of the Civil War, 1859-1861* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clarke Company, 1912), 76; William T. Sherman to Thomas Ewing Jr., Jan. 21, 1860, in *Ibid.*, 124-125; William T. Sherman to John Sherman, April 15, 1861, in Rachel Sherman Thorndike, ed. *The Sherman Letters: Correspondence Between General and Senator Sherman from 1837 to 1891* (New York: C. Scribner and Sons, 1894), 114.

impediment, and if we are to take along and feed the negroes who flee to us for refuge, it will be an impossible task,” he carped again, chiding his brother by saying, “You cannot solve this negro question in a day.”²⁹

Sherman’s time in Memphis had been an eye-opening experience. It was in those roughly five months—from July to November, 1862—that he first began to realize the full depth of hatred Southerners had for Yankees like himself, and it was in that old cotton town where he began formulating the hard-war policies that would soon make him famous. Anticipating some of his actions in Atlanta in 1864, he speculated often about purging the city’s white residents under the force of arms, and he became infamous for responding to guerilla attacks with violent reprisals. “The entire South, man, woman and child are all against us, armed and determined,” he told his brother, saying “It will call for a million men for several years to put them down.” Memphis was also where Sherman experienced his first real heartbreak of the war. During a return visit a year later, just after having his family visit him at the front, his young son Willy died of typhoid fever in a Memphis hotel room. For the rest of the war, he and Ellen consoled each other in their grief, though Sherman never stopped blaming himself for his son’s death. He even once wrote of seeing visions of his son whenever he let his mind drift away from the war to his wife and family. Sadly, Willy was the first of two sons he’d lose in the war. He’d learn of the death of his second son, his one-year-old Charles, upon entering Savannah around Christmas, 1864.³⁰

Yet Memphis matters most of all because it was where Sherman began developing his own approach to emancipation. Because he arrived in early 1862 and because the Emancipation

²⁹ William T. Sherman to John Sherman, Oct. 1, 1862, in *SCW*, 311-312. William T. Sherman to John Sherman, Sept. 3, 1862, in *The Sherman Letters*, 161.

³⁰ William T. Sherman to John Sherman, Sept. 22, 1862 in *Ibid.*, 161-162. See also McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 38-341, 423.

Proclamation was then still months away, Sherman had wide latitude in how he handled the situation. His first instinct was to do nothing. He didn't see it as his place to change the relationship between slaveholders and the people they enslaved, believing that issue was one the courts would ultimately decide. He therefore didn't welcome fugitive slaves; nor did he send them away or return them to their masters. The Second Confiscation Act, passed in July of 1862, granted freedom to enslaved people who came within army lines, but Sherman's overall approach was to narrowly enforce the measure and do little more than the law allowed (Ironically, while Sherman disapproved of the law, his brother was one of the Republicans who shepherded it through Congress). But he could only do nothing for so long, for once the city fell into federal hands, it became a magnet for fugitive slaves from across the region, which forced Sherman to come up with a more permanent policy.³¹

The policy he ultimately settled on centered on a preoccupation of his: the need for military labor. Sherman stipulated that for enslaved people to remain in the city they had to work and preferably for the army. Only it was never as simple as that. Other commanders gave similar orders at other times in the war, but Sherman acted with characteristic restraint. Not only did he withhold wages, believing that some setting up of accounts would happen at the end of the war, he made little allowances for food, water, or shelter and left those unable to work—scores of women, children, and the elderly—to their own devices. As a result, people suffered, and a precedent fell into place: Sherman, for one, returned this restrained approach time and again, and in acting in such a close-fisted fashion, he forced hundreds, soon-to-be-thousands, of freed

³¹ See Marszaleck, Sherman, 191-193. See also, McDonough, William Tecumseh Sherman, 342-344. See also, Noel C. Fisher, "Prepare them for My Coming: General William T. Sherman, Total War, and the Pacification of West Tennessee," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Summer 1992), 75-86.

people into make-shift refugee camps, which became the city's the stand-in approach to freed refugees.³²

As the army began its slow descent into Georgia in the Spring of 1864, another contentious issue arose that exposed the full-extent of Sherman's racism. In addition to declaring enslaved people free, the Emancipation Proclamation contained a second provision that permitted black men to enlist in the army for the first time. Though this policy change would be the most revolutionary and transformative measure of the war, Sherman resisted it at every turn. "I think the negro question has been run into the ground," he griped to John from Chattanooga, which echoed complaints he had made a year earlier when recruitment began in earnest. "I prefer to keep this a white man's war," he wrote Ellen that April, saying "With my opinion of negroes and my experience, yea prejudice, I cannot trust them yet." Except Sherman had no intention of trusting them. At Vicksburg, for instance, he did everything in his power to countermand the order. He stalled recruiting efforts, told troops the policy would be revised, and ensured his men that African Americans would be kept at "some side purpose" and not in combat roles. Writing John, who admonished his brother's handling of the issue, he resolved, "I won't trust niggers to fight yet."³³

Along those dusty roads leading to Atlanta, Sherman's resistance to black soldiering eventually forced an uncomfortable reckoning with the War Department over who would actually have the final say on emancipation policy: generals in the field or politicians in D.C.?

³² See note above.

³³ William T. Sherman to John Sherman, April 22, 1864, William Tecumseh Sherman Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., quoted in McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 470; William T. Sherman to Ellen Sherman, April, 17, 1863 in Howe, *Home Letters*, 249. William T. Sherman to John Sherman, April 26, 1863, in Simpson, Berlin, ed. *Sherman's Civil War*, 459-461. See also, Michael Fellman, "A White Man's War," *Civil War Times* (December, 2009).

The issue once again hinged on the status of escaped enslaved people and Sherman's inability to see African Americans as anything other than sources of labor. Likening freed people to a "kind of trash that will only fill our hospitals and keep well to the rear," he insisted on converting the enslaved men who sought refuge within his lines into military laborers and sending the women, children, and the elderly back to Chattanooga—or away from his lines completely. If he was to have African Americans in his army at all, he insisted that they take up "pioneer" roles, where they would perform all the menial tasks of fighting a war—building trenches, digging latrines, or burying the dead.³⁴

The problem was that consigning freed men to work as laborers conflicted with the government's recruitment of black troops, which was something that Sherman flatly refused to allow. His immovability on the issue eventually wound all the way up the chain of command and brought his Commander-in-Chief into the fold. In August of 1864, Lincoln would write Sherman politely asking for his cooperation but none came. Sherman stood firm. He told the president that while he had the "highest veneration of the law" and would "respect it always," the order conflicted with his own personal "opinion of its propriety" and promised to address the issue again at a later date after Atlanta had been won. In response to what was a clear and obvious snub, Lincoln—then desperate for a major victory and concerned about his own re-election chances that November—simply decided to not press the issue any further. As a result, Sherman won a tacit political concession allowing him to craft the emancipation policy he so desired. It

³⁴ Quoted in Michael Fellman, *Citizen Soldier: A Life of William Tecumseh Sherman* (New York: Random House, 1995), 160. See also, Mohr, "The Atlanta Campaign and the African American Experience in Civil War Georgia," 281-282.

was a precedent he well remembered when he began making preparations for his next forward march to Savannah.³⁵

But Sherman didn't get off that easy. Shortly after telling Lincoln he would revisit the issue at a later date, he wrote a Northern recruiting agent and explained himself: He claimed, in part, that freed people were "in a transition state" and thus not on par with white soldiers and that the army couldn't yet trust freed people to win the war. Then he said this: "No one shall infer from this that I am not the friend of the Negro...I and the armies I have commanded have conducted to safe points more negroes than those of any general officer in the army, but I prefer some negroes as pioneers, teamsters, servants, and cooks, others gradually to experiment in the art of the Soldier." This was actually Sherman being more tempered than usual; nevertheless, the letter wound up in the hands of the press, and for the first time the nation read of Sherman's insubordination, which he took as a profound public embarrassment. "I never thought my negro letter would get into the papers," he would later write to a friend, before griping: "I like niggers well enough as niggers, but when fools & idiots try & make niggers better than ourselves I have an opinion."³⁶

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On September 22nd, 1864, after five long months of Confederates digging in and falling back, after an over hundred-mile march of hard and continuous fighting, after fierce battles at Dalton, Resaca, New Hope Church, Kennesaw Mountain, and Peach-Tree Creek, after countless miles of tracks torn up and destroyed, bridges burned, farms desolated, enslaved people freed or impressed, and after nearly seventy-five thousand casualties, Atlanta—the last great Confederate

³⁵ Official Records of the War of Rebellion (O.R.), Vol. 38, Chapter, 50, Part IV, pg. 210. See, Mohr, "The Atlanta Campaign and the African American Experience in Civil War Georgia," 281-282.

³⁶ Sherman to John Spooner, July, 30, 1864 in *SCW* 677-678.

citadel—fell. The pendulum started swinging in late July. With Sherman’s army on the outskirts of the city, Confederate President Jefferson Davis replaced Joe Johnston with the hard-charging John Bell Hood, a man who had lost an arm and a leg in the war and would soon lose Atlanta. Where Johnston was wisely cautious, Hood attacked: On July 20th, he threw his entire force up against Sherman at Peachtree Creek—and lost. He then withdrew and attacked again in what is known as the Battle of Atlanta: a bloody day of fighting concentrated at multiple points around the city, with the heaviest fighting happening to the east, near Decatur. When the dust settled, the Confederates still held Atlanta, though not for long. Throughout August, Sherman besieged the city and severed Hood’s supply lines; by September, Hood had no choice but pull out. He swung his army north, hoping to draw Sherman back into Tennessee, but it didn’t work. Sherman remained in Atlanta, “The Gate City of the South,” and thought about where he’d send his army next.³⁷

Though sometimes overshadowed by events in the east, where Grant and Lee were busy making myths of themselves in Virginia, the taking of Atlanta was where the war turned. In losing Atlanta, the Confederacy lost one of its last citadels; one of its last industrial hearths; a vital rail link; and one of the last best symbols of Confederate strength. Moreover, losing Atlanta meant losing scores of Confederate hospitals; a large and important military arsenal; tons of railcars and rail lines; and Atlanta falling forced all those white refugees into going back on the run, which killed Confederate morale and made the end seem as near as ever. Indeed, if the Confederate war machine could ever be so blithely described as a kitchen table, losing Atlanta was like losing its last leg.

³⁷ See Albert Castel, *Decision in the West*. See also, McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 743-756

Politically, the damage was even worse. The fall of Atlanta reinvigorated a war-weary electorate. Northern morale rose, and Lincoln rode the momentum to a stunning victory in November of 1864. It was perhaps the most remarkable election in our nation's history: First of all, not only were provisions made so that federal soldiers could vote at the front, an early iteration of absentee voting, the overwhelming majority of those soldiers voted for Lincoln. More remarkable still was that not only was the 1864 election the first example of a republican government holding an election during wartime, Lincoln's challenger, former general George McClellan, ran as a Peace-Democrat and promised to end the war by settling with the South; the voters chose war over peace. Even more remarkable was that in choosing Lincoln, voters not only chose war, they, in a sense, chose emancipation and ensured that ending slavery would remain a war aim. History is never as straightforward as it seems, but Atlanta was the war's watershed. Its fall crushed the Confederacy, saved Lincoln, and straightened the path toward abolition.³⁸

Underneath these political shifts, the Atlanta Campaign also foreshadowed where the war would go next. The first example of this were Sherman's great raids. In late July, as the battle for Atlanta was beginning to break, Sherman initiated a slight tactical shift: He launched a series of cavalry raids designed to sweep around the city and destroy as many supply lines as possible. Most of the raids were great successes; the one "big raid," however, was not. Begun on July 28th, the idea behind the "big raid" was for a large force of 10,000 men to circle around the city in opposing directions: Edward McCook's 5,000 would go to the West, and George Stoneman's 5,000 would head east. The two would then join forces in an assault on Hood's last remaining

³⁸ See McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 804-806.

supply line at Lovejoy Station, a rail line just south of Atlanta. From there, McCook had orders to plunge further into Georgia and liberate Union prisoners held in Macon and Andersonville, one of, if not the, great gulag of the Confederate states, while Stoneman headed east. The whole operation was a fiasco from the start. McCook ignored orders and had his men scattered after an attack from Confederate cavalry; Stoneman, left stranded at Lovejoy Station, was later captured. All told, the raid left some 2,000 federal soldiers either dead or wounded in an embarrassing defeat.³⁹

Nevertheless, the raids happened. And because they happened, the army's mounted wings dug deep into the Georgia countryside, carrying the war to communities well beyond Atlanta. For the unsuspecting, this was a wake-up call. A war that was once distant and abstract was now up-close, personal, and looming all around. Militias took to arms, white women fled, and whole communities stood guard. "Sleepless nights," wrote Dolly Sumner Lunt, a widowed plantation mistress from Covington, southeast of Atlanta. Stoneman's cavalry had been seen on the road, and Lunt had heard reports of stores being ransacked, railroads being destroyed, and people starting to flee. Miles away, in Newnan, a middle Georgia town south of Atlanta, Fanny Beers, a nurse in the Confederate hospital there, watched as federal cavalry clashed with confederate horseman at a railroad depot. Locals rushed past her into the action—mostly boys and old men—while others fled. "There was no time for deliberation," she wrote. The war was fast extending its reach.⁴⁰

³⁹ Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 134-135.

⁴⁰ Dolly Sumner Lunt, *A Woman's Wartime Journal: An Account of the Passage over a Georgia Plantation of Sherman's Army on the March to the Sea, as Recorded in the Diary of Dolly Sumner Lunt* (New York: The Century Company, 1918), pgs. 9-11; Fannie A. Beers, *Memories: A Record of Personal Experience and Adventure During Four Years of War* (Philadelphia: Press of J.B. Lippincott, 1891), 140.

For the enslaved, the raids carried a different meaning. Some were rightly weary. Armed white men on horseback was a specter the enslaved knew to approach with caution; some probably even found themselves in the thick of the fighting. Yet the raids were also the army's first foray into the upper reaches of middle Georgia, a part of the state where the lower piedmont folds into the state's fertile plantation belt, which was home to thousands of enslaved people living on plantations across the region. Blue-coated men that far into Georgia stirred already restless waters. Enslaved people began fleeing to the two cavalry divisions almost immediately. In Covington, a group of enslaved men joined Stoneman, and one historian estimates that by time Stoneman approached Macon he had as many as five thousand more following at his rear. Tragically, many of these men—and possibly women, too—met what was likely a brutal fate once the raid went bad. One soldier urged the enslaved to “escape while they could, as they faced a severe fate if caught,” but admitted that “some did and some stayed,” with those that stayed likely killed.⁴¹

These were unnerving times for white Georgians. Having a massive federal army sweeping down on the state was one thing; a slave insurrection from within was another matter entirely. The idea that the people they enslaved were enemies among them was something white southerners had long feared, and the war chipped away at whatever illusions of loyalty they had left. Kate Stone, a well-known Louisiana diarist, likened the whispered rumors of insurrection to living on a landmine; Charles Jones, Jr., the Christian slave-owner from the Georgia coast,

⁴¹ S.E.D. Smith, *The Soldier's Friend: Being a Thrilling Narrative of Grandma Smith's Four Years' Experience and Observation, as Matron, in the Hospitals of the South During the Late Disastrous Conflict in America* (Memphis, TN: Bulletin Publishing Company, 1867), 132; W.L. Sanford, *History of the Fourteenth Illinois Cavalry and the Brigades to which it Belonged* (Chicago: R.L. Donnelly and Sons, 1898), 194. See also, Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 146; Mohr, “The Atlanta Campaign and the African American Experience of Civil War Georgia,” 283-285.

likewise knew that danger lurked all-around. “They are traitors who may pilot an enemy into your *bedchamber!* They know every road and swamp and creek and plantation in the country, and are the worst of spies,” he wrote after one of his most trusted enslaved people slipped off in the dark of the night. Sherman’s raids into middle Georgia preyed on these fears, stoking a tinder-box already primed and ready to explode. In response, Georgia’s governor, Joseph E. Brown, began releasing one man from militia duty per every eight-hundred enslaved people in a given county. The released men were to patrol the countryside, round up runaways, and quell any signs of unrest. The policy was one the Governor initiated earlier in the year but accelerated after the raids, once petitions from worried whites started flooding in. The message was clear: Georgia was at war on two fronts.⁴²

The raids, however, were more than random shots across the bow; they were opening salvos in the month-long siege of Atlanta. Following the Battle of Atlanta and for much of August, Sherman and his men dug-in and placed constant pressure on the city’s defenses. Then, late in the night on September 2nd, wild explosions sparked by retreating Confederates burning their own munitions alerted federal soldiers that Hood had made his move: He was in retreat. He left massive fires burning, which caused whole buildings to burst like fire-works. It was the sound of defeat. Sherman’s men knew it and basked in the idea of waltzing into Atlanta; Hood’s men knew it too and knew that in losing Atlanta they had lost more than a city. Sam Watkins, a Confederate private from Tennessee, listened from Jonesboro and remembered watching forlorn faces of peers grow longer, colder, more defeated. “It was too much for human endurance,” he

⁴² John Q. Anderson, ed. *Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone, 1861-1868* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1955), 28; Charles Colcock Jones to Charles Colcock Jones, Jr., July 10, 1862, in Charles Colcock Jones, Jr. Collection, Special Division, University of Georgia Libraries, quoted in Clark, *Dwelling Place*, 415; Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 146.

wrote, admitting that the rank and file were “willing to ring down the curtain, put out the footlights and go home.”⁴³

Thus began the occupation of Atlanta. From September to mid-November, the army moved in and absorbed the city while a scattering of troops remained in Marietta and Dalton. Sherman also made sure that he and his army had the place mostly to themselves. Dating back to his time in Memphis, Sherman had been developing a somewhat idiosyncratic view of Southern civilians. He did not think peace could be had so long as white Southerners inhabited spaces occupied by the federal army. Federal jurisdiction, he believed, could only be exerted and peace could only be achieved in the absence of white Confederates. As a result, upon moving into Atlanta, he issued an expulsion order, which gave the remaining white residents five days to leave the city. The order raised outcries immediately. Hood protested, as did Atlanta’s mayor and a host of other residents, but Sherman was resolute. “If people raise a howl against my barbarity and cruelty, I will answer that war is war, and not popularity seeking,” he would write to his old friend Henry Halleck, now the army’s Chief of Staff. “You might as well appeal against the thunder-storm as against these terrible hardships of war,” he would write again, this time to Atlanta’s mayor. Sherman could be so confident partly because he knew he had the backing of the War Department, which had already doled out years of legal and military precedent justifying expulsion.⁴⁴

Still, the order is classic Sherman, and his comments are exemplary contributions to his cult of personality. Look closely, however, and the order reveals another shade of Sherman’s

⁴³ Sam Watkins, *Co. Aytch, Maury Grays, First Tennessee Regiment, or a Sideshow to the Big Show* (Chattanooga, TN: Times Printing Company, 1906), 189-190.

⁴⁴ William T. Sherman to Henry Halleck, Sept. 4, 1864 in Simpson, Berlin, eds. *Sherman Civil War*, 697; William T. Sherman to James M. Calhoun et al, Sept. 12, 1864 in *Ibid.*, 707-709. See also, Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 207-208; McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 556-557.

war-making philosophy. The dots, like much of Sherman's career, connect back to Memphis. Aside from believing that peace was impossible with white Atlantans living alongside his army, Sherman didn't want the trouble of having to support them. He was a "born quartermaster," Henry Halleck had once said, and knew that so many people clinging about would cut into his supplies, slow his army down, and sidetrack his men from the ultimate goal of winning the war. Sound familiar? He had drawn a similar line in Memphis with the enslaved who sought refuge within his lines. Then, as now, he committed himself to a streamlined war of limited impediments, even in the face of human suffering. His actions—first in Memphis, then in Atlanta—are important because they represent the logic on which he based his next move, his crushing thrust through Georgia. Furthermore, in expelling white civilians from Atlanta, Sherman signaled his willingness to use force. He forced residents out, and he arrested those that chose to stay. While few sympathies should be withheld for white Confederates implicated in policy, his heavy-handedness previews the coercion he and his men would also inflict on the enslaved.⁴⁵

It didn't take long.

On the one hand, the combined shocks of occupation and expulsion triggered swift changes in Atlanta. The city was now free. Slavery slowly died with the occupation, and neither soldiers nor enslaved people wasted time in reminding white Atlantans of what this meant. As he prepared to evacuate, Samuel Richards, a white diarist, noted the "impudent airs" enslaved people put on once the occupation began. The enslaved "were all free and the Yankee soldiers don't fail to assure them of that fact," he would write, noting in another instance the people he

⁴⁵ Quoted in McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 309.

enslaved were “as independent as can be.” For Richards, a successful and propertied businessman, emancipation left him stunned: “Our negro property vanished into air,” he would write while surveying his properties. In the meantime, as slavery dissolved openly on the streets, Atlanta underwent a metamorphosis. This once great former Confederate fortress—a former hub of forced movement which only weeks earlier had thousands of impressed slaves working on its defenses—was now a haven for freed slaves and fleeing slaves from all over the region. First, it was those that had been with the army, traveling and working for significant portions of the Atlanta campaign; then came those who made their escape into the city after its fall. Soon, there would be thousands of such men and women living in the city and in settlements lining Atlanta’s outer limits.⁴⁶

On the other hand, as Atlanta turned toward freedom, important continuities remained. For one, the occupation inaugurated a new regime of surveillance and repression. Like the Confederates before him, Sherman mandated a “pass system,” which required that freed people carry identifications cards listing discernable features like height, weight, and complexion. Further, any freed person wandering the streets needed either a pass from their “master or employer” or an approved pass from the military—or risk being arrested and placed under military guard. To the formerly enslaved, such measures reeked of the regime Sherman and his men had just vanquished in taking the city. For years white slave-owners instituted similar pass systems—both in urban spaces like Atlanta and rural plantation districts—in an effort to constrain the movement of enslaved people, limit the spread of any rebellious persons or ideas, and snuff out runaways. It was one of the many edifices supporting the slave regime’s overlapping systems of control and confinement. Sherman and his occupying army likely knew

⁴⁶ Sam Richards, Diary Entry of September 9, 1864 in Wendy Hamand Venet, ed. *Sam Richard’s Civil War Diary: A Chronicle of the Atlanta Homefront* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2009, 235-236.

this and employed the system for reasons similar to their Confederate counterparts, but ultimately the pass system in Atlanta fed Sherman's growing preoccupation with the need for military labor. Not having a pass—which effectively meant not having a place of work—was a pretense for seizing freed men and women, putting them under arms, and placing them in the employment of the U.S. army.⁴⁷

This was also classic Sherman. Using the enslaved, now freed people, as military laborers was an obsession of his that dated back to Memphis but had grown in leaps and bounds over the course of the Atlanta campaign. Recall that while fighting in northern Georgia, impressment into the army's pioneer corps was Sherman's preferred method dealing with the enslaved who fled to army lines; it was also the grounds on which he refused black enlistment, a brouhaha with the war department that brought Lincoln into the fray. Now, months later, he was as committed to it as ever. He knew he had the stature after winning Atlanta to institute a wider labor policy, and, moreover, he knew that the Confederate army had little compunction in employing the enslaved on their own defenses. Johnston and Hood had both done so in incredible numbers throughout the Atlanta campaign, which Sherman believed gave the Confederate army a competitive advantage. Putting freed people to work in the federal army reversed this advantage and discouraged freed people from getting too close to the army. Work was essential and already a pre-requisite for freedom.⁴⁸

Some freed people, to be fair, likely jumped at the opportunity to work for the army. Attaining work as a washerwoman, cook, nurse, or personal valet were often ways for freed people to ensure protection from former owners that might come looking for them; these

⁴⁷ Mohr, "The Atlanta Campaign and the African American Experience in Civil War Georgia," 287.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

positions were also ways for freed people to earn a little money and support themselves through the war; working within the army could also mean taking part in a war that would determine their own freedom, a proposition which held deep meaning for the enslaved and led thousands to serve in any way they could. Positions like these became more widely available as increasing numbers of freed people came into army lines and more officers felt the allure of having valets, servants, or cooks, but these were always exceptional cases: For the vast majority, military labor was nightmare that extracted mean, corporal forms of punishing labor. An adjutant general admitted as much when he speculated that the army intended on keeping freed people from the Atlanta campaign “at hard labor—in many instances greater than they were subjected to by their former owners.”

Perhaps most of all, the occupation of Atlanta was a stark expression of the army’s power. Sherman’s army was like an armed giant whose weight sat on the city, leaving an imprint all across Northern Georgia. And as is the case with giants, the army sustained itself on a hefty intake of raw supplies, which meant wrenching destruction by simply inhabiting a space and imbibing what was available. This was the fate that fell upon Atlanta in the fall of 1864. Sherman’s men made themselves at home. The looting began as soon as John Schofield’s men strode into the city as the advance arm of the blue-coated behemoth. Soldiers gutted downtown businesses, shattered windows, and went on a mad dash for luxuries like tobacco. “Such a state of utter disorder and confusion presented itself to my eyes then,” wrote Samuel Richards who watched as soldiers rummaged through his downtown store, breaking open everything and taking it as if it were a “free fight.” As unbecoming as it might be, what Richards witnessed was the

spoils of war in action, an army flexing its muscles while celebrating the ruination of a defeated foe.⁴⁹

Except the occupation implicated friend and foe alike. Freed men and women felt the scourge of the army's depredations; even men and women who aided the army as it waited at Atlanta's gates fell victim to the looming power of the army. Robert Webster, a freed person of color who routinely cared for federal soldiers imprisoned in the city, had his tobacco stores—that is, most of his tradable wealth—stolen out of his home; Prince Ponder, an enslaved man who hired his time and ran a small grocery, likewise had most all of his inventory confiscated, including his livestock. Polly, a free woman of color, and Henry, enslaved by a downtown bank, were similarly disrupted one night by a force that—plank by plank—dismantled their home. Why? Tents. An officer who stood by told an anguished Henry that the men needed the wood from the house so that the army could build tents. It was a lame excuse, and the restitution was even lamer: a mere \$125 was all the Southern Claims Commission thought the home was worth.⁵⁰

Incidents like these were just the tip of the iceberg. Though the pilfering eventually slowed, the occupation brought freed men and women into close quarters with the army. Soldiers and freed people lived amongst each other in Atlanta for the better part of two months, from

⁴⁹ Sam Richards, Diary Entry Sept. 2, 1864 in Venet, ed. *Sam Richard's Civil War Diary*, 234.

⁵⁰ Thomas G. Dyer, "Half-Slave, Half-Free: Unionist Robert Webster in Confederate Atlanta," in Lesley J. Gordon, John C. Inscoe, eds. *Inside the Confederate Nation: Essays in Honor of Emory M. Thomas* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2005), 308; Testimony of Prince Ponder, Dec. 20, 1875, Claim of Prince Ponder, Box 34, Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 217, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Testimony of Henry Beedles, December 20, 1875, Claim of Henry Beedles, *Southern Claims Commission Approved Claims, 1871-1880: Georgia*. Microfilm Publication M1658, 761 fiche; NAI: 566157. Records of the Accounting Officers of the Department of the Treasury, Record Group 217; National Archives at Washington, D.C. See also, Marc Wortman, *The Bonfire: The Siege and Burning of Atlanta* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009).

September to mid-November, though the balance of power was never close to being equal and threats to freed men and women never abated. The soldiers were not only white, they had guns. The army was not only licensed and authorized by the power of the U.S. government, it was at war, and the war provided a kind of license of its own: It gave acts otherwise impermissible the aegis of military necessity, which emboldened soldiers as they confiscated as much property as they could find.

Atlanta was not the first city to experience an occupation such as this. It was also not the only place to experience such hard-war policies that impacted enslaved people. The Atlanta Campaign *is* important, however, in the sense that it set the tone for the one that followed. The violence of Atlanta—the long hot summer months of fighting, the raids, the shelling of the city, the tearing-up of railroads, and the wonton recklessness with which soldiers pilfered from and impressed newly freed men and women—previewed a long and harried march in which the force concentrated in Atlanta fanned out across the Georgia, rolling onto plantations and into the lives of the enslaved. Accordingly, in this next campaign, in this next long march through Georgia, wartime emancipation became as violent, chaotic, and as deliberately intimate as any moment in the war.

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The view from Atlanta in the fall of 1864 presented a far rosier image of the war than what Grant and Sherman saw when they surveyed the field at the start of the year. The tide had clearly turned. In the east, beginning in early May, Grant put the war on his front foot. Instead of letting Lee dictate the fighting, Grant engaged and engaged repeatedly, which put Lee on the defensive. It became a war of attrition. Grant's large army kept continuous pressure on Lee, with serious fights totaling up massive deaths and lasting several days at a time. Though the campaign

produced high casualty counts and brutal headlines in Northern papers, the strategy worked. By early summer of 1864, in a little over month, Grant accomplished what no other Union general had been able to do in three years. He pushed Lee across the James River past Richmond, and now had Lee's army pinned down at Petersburg, a railroad crossing just south of the Confederate capital. The two sides entrenched themselves. Lee faced east with his back to the Shenandoah Valley. Grant faced west with his back to the James, where from his port at City Point, he could coordinate the war and keep his army well supplied. In September and October, as Sherman nestled into Atlanta, Grant made a few final attempts to break the siege line before winter, but Lee's lines held firm. Nonetheless, Grant had victory in his grasp. He just had to wait through the cold.⁵¹

Sherman's position in Atlanta was less clear-cut. While the city was his, Hood was gone. After surrendering Atlanta, the reckless Confederate general marched his beleaguered army back through Georgia's northwestern corridor and into Alabama, where he was now threatening Sherman's supplies and feigning a move back into Tennessee. Sherman could have followed him. The war, after all, was no longer about holding key cities or strategic points; it was about finding Confederate armies and defeating them. Sherman, however, knew that following Hood meant abandoning ground his men fought hard to attain. "If I turn back now the whole effect of my campaign will be lost," he wrote Grant in early November. He knew as well that should he follow and confront Hood, the Confederates would likely retreat once again, tugging he and his men into a drawn-out game of cat-and-mouse designed to frustrate the federal war effort. The only answer was decisive action. "Instead of being on the defensive I would be on the offensive, instead of guessing at what he intends to do he would have to guess at my plans," Sherman

⁵¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 724-737, 756-760.

wrote, with the details of his next move becoming clearer by the day. As he told one of his subordinates: “We now have a good entering wedge, and Should drive it home.” And with that, the decision was basically made: he was going to leave Atlanta and “strike out into the heart of Georgia.”⁵²

On the surface, Sherman’s overarching plan was simple. He planned on dispatching a wing of his army to deal with Hood, and he intended on marching the rest, some 60,000 men, deep into Georgia—through Macon, Milledgeville, and onto Savannah. He wanted his final destination kept secret, even from his own men, so that Hood and Jeff Davis wouldn’t know where he might turn up. Giving him the freedom to move was the fact that his chosen route lay virtually undefended. With Hood gone, the only Confederate forces left in Georgia were a smattering of militia and Joseph Wheeler’s Confederate cavalry, in all maybe 13,000 soldiers. It was as if all Georgia— in effect, the Confederate heartland—sat ready for the taking. Moreover, a move through Georgia gave Sherman greater flexibility on where he might go next. From Savannah, he could then move on to Columbia or Charleston—or mount a march up through the Carolinas and into Virginia, all the while tightening the vice around Lee’s position in Petersburg. Strategically, a campaign through Georgia had the potential of toppling the Confederacy’s entire house of cards.⁵³

Yet what Sherman proposed was more than a strategic end-around. It was an attempt to pummel the South into submission and break its people’s will to fight. “I propose to demonstrate the vulnerability of the South and make its inhabitants feel that war & individual Ruin are synonymous (sic) terms,” he said early on while still pondering his potential routes. Later, in

⁵² William T. Sherman to Ulysses S. Grant, Nov. 2, 1864 in Simpson, Berlin, eds. *Sherman’s Civil War*, 748. William T. Sherman to Ulysses S. Grant, Oct. 1, 1864 in *Ibid.*, 732-733; William T. Sherman to George Thomas, Oct. 2, 1864 in *Ibid.*, 729-730; William T. Sherman to Henry Halleck, Oct. 19, 1864 in *Ibid.*, 735.

⁵³ See McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 807-810.

another missive, he repeated himself but added, “They [Southern inhabitants] don’t know what war means, but when the rich planters of the Oconee and Savannah see their fences and corn and hogs and sheep vanish before their eyes they will have more than a mean opinion of the ‘Yanks.’” This, in other words, was no ordinary campaign. Sherman intended on targeting the white South’s material ability to withstand the war as much as any stated enemy. His goal was to make the war so cruel that white Georgians would no longer have the mental, emotional, or material wherewithal to support the war, all but rending the Confederacy apart by virtue of a devastated and demoralized citizenry. “Until we can repopulate Georgia it is useless to occupy it, but the utter destruction of its roads, houses, and people will cripple their military resources,” he explained to a skeptical Grant. “I can make the march,” he told his friend and superior, “and make Georgia howl.”⁵⁴

Though people have long speculated about Sherman’s intentions and whether his tactics birthed the idea of ‘total war,’ the truth is that he saw his plan as little more than a raw form of nineteenth century state-craft. “If we can march a well-appointed Army right through his territory, it is a demonstration to the world, foreign and domestic, that we have the power that Davis cannot resist,” he told Grant in November. “This may not be war,” he went on, “but rather Statesmanship, nevertheless, it is overwhelming to my mind that there are thousands of people who will reason thus—‘If the North can march an army right through the South, it is proof positive that the North can prevail in this contest,’ leaving only open the question of the North’s willingness to use that power.” War in this case was truly politics by other means. The march was not simply a matter of military expediency. It was a means of affirming the legitimate power

⁵⁴ William T. Sherman to George Thomas, Oct. 2, 1864 in Simpson, Berlin, Eds., *Sherman’s Civil War*, 729-730; William T. Sherman to Henry Halleck, Oct. 19, 1864 in *Ibid.*, 735-736; William T. Sherman to Ulysses S. Grant, Oct. 9, 1864 in *Ibid.*, 731.

of the United States by claiming a monopoly on violence and discrediting a belligerent nation to the point of complete capitulation—modern statecraft stripped down to its bare essentials.⁵⁵

Despite Sherman's confidence in his ability to make the March, Grant had serious reservations. The issue was not so much strategy. While Grant preferred a much stronger movement to parry Hood away from Tennessee, he trusted Sherman's judgment and liked the idea of the two armies eventually converging on Lee in Virginia. The issue was logistics. Marching through Georgia required relinquishing the army's supply lines in Atlanta, which meant practically detaching the army from any base of support and plunging in blind. The soldiers, all 60,000 of them, would have to move across the state foraging on whatever they could find. It was a risk Grant was not sure was worth taking, especially on the heels of having Lee corralled at Petersburg, Atlanta won, and Hood fleeing into Alabama. It involved too many unnecessary risks: What if Georgia wasn't as plentiful as Sherman imagined? What if Wheeler's cavalry pestered Sherman to the point of slowing the army down? What if all the rivers and roads proved impassible? Potential pitfalls presented themselves at every stage, though Grant eventually gave in: "Great good fortune attend you," he wrote, telling his friend "I believe you will be eminently successful." It was the green-light Sherman needed to start "smashing things to the sea."⁵⁶

Preparations began in earnest on November 9th, when Sherman issued his official campaign orders. His first order pertained to military structure. He reorganized the army into two

⁵⁵ William T. Sherman to Ulysses S. Grant, Nov. 6, 1864 in Simpson, Berlin, eds. *Sherman's Civil War*, 749-752. See also, John Bennett Walters, *Merchant of Terror: General Sherman and Total War* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1973). See also, Anne J. Bailey, *War and Ruin: William T. Sherman and the Atlanta Campaign* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 1993); Mark A. Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008);

⁵⁶ OR. Ser. 1 Vol. 39. Pt. 3., 679; William T. Sherman to Ulysses S. Grant, Oct. 11, 1864 in Simpson, Berlin, eds. *Sherman Civil War*, 732. McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 754-755.

wings. He gave Oliver Otis Howard, a Mainer and future namesake of Howard University, command of the right wing; Henry W. Slocum, a dapper New Yorker, who would later help build the Brooklyn Bridge, took command of the left. Sherman then offered orders for how he wanted the foraging done. He instructed his men to “forage liberally,” giving them license to appropriate enough food for ten days at time. Soldiers were never to enter homes or threaten civilians, and to that end, only corps commanders had the authority to burn cotton gins, mills, storehouses, or plantations homes. His stipulations on burning these structures were commensurate with how well white families complied. If local whites obstructed the campaign, sheltered guerillas, or attacked any of his men, his officers could enforce “a devastation more or less relentless according to the measure of such hostility.” Furthermore, any of his mounted men could appropriate pack animals as they wished, though he urged restraint in the case of the poor, who he presumed could hardly afford such a loss and were generally apathetic about the war, and encouraged force in the case of the rich, who he felt could afford losing a horse or two and were, he believed, still fighting.⁵⁷

His last order, attached at the end almost like an addendum or afterthought, detailed his plans for the enslaved men and women the army would inevitably meet as it moved deeper into Georgia’s rich plantation belt. It read: “Negroes who are able-bodied and can be of service to the army may be taken along, but each army commander will bear in mind that the question of supplies is a very important one and that his first duty is to see to them who bear arms.” The order was all Sherman would allow by way of a “refugee policy,” and its perfunctory vagueness deserves pausing over. In some respects, the order is hardly surprising. It’s explicit interest in

⁵⁷ “Special Field Orders No. 120” in O.R. Ser. 1 Vol. 39. Pt. III, 713-714.

only those who could work, its subtle urging to remember the problem of supplies and provisions, its insistence on provisioning soldiers first, and its implied endorsement of military impressment—of ambiguously suggesting that enslaved men and women may be ‘taken along’—all align with how Sherman had always approached the enslaved. From Memphis to Atlanta and all the stops in between, emancipation in and of itself was never a stated objective. He either resisted it, qualified it, or contorted it to meet his own needs or opinions. A reluctant liberator was all he was willing to be, and his supposed “refugee policy” crystalized this reluctance into place.⁵⁸

But the order is also baffling in a way. Sherman may have been reluctant to embrace emancipation, but he wasn’t dumb. He had been stationed Memphis, he had spent many months fighting in Mississippi, and as a young man he had lived in the South and even once traveled through that same Georgia countryside he was on the verge of invading. In other words, he knew slavery. He knew the size of those plantations between Atlanta and Savannah, and he knew how many enslaved people he might encounter. He must have also known from the raids that the enslaved would strike off after the army and persist even in the face of death or re-capture. Though he might have had no idea just how large of an emancipation event the March would become, or just how many men and women might *follow* his army, or how many more might join him in Savannah, he had to have known that his ‘refugee policy’ was hardly suitable. Surely, he knew, too, that at this point in the war, with victory in reach and the Emancipation Proclamation now two years old, emancipation was no longer something he could ignore and thus required addressing in some real fashion. And yet, Sherman never wavered. His priorities

⁵⁸ Ibid.

were his army's speed and economy, which lead to chaos and calamity breaking out along the road to Savannah.

Yet it's not what the policy did or didn't say that made it so flawed; it's what its silences assumed. The order's principal shortcoming was that it was written with a certain conceit—as if the army alone determined the course of emancipation. This had never been the case, and the march was about to reveal in high relief the ways in which emancipation evolved according to the *pull* of the army and the *push* of the enslaved. Sherman could resist and plan one vision for his march, but the enslaved were going to respond according to their own vision of what the march meant. At every stop along those dusty roads through Georgia, these two competing visions over the war, emancipation, and the army's role in inaugurating a new birth of freedom came into constant contact, turning the march into a month and half long collision course exposing the highs, the lows, the hopes and failures, and all the beauty and perversion of America's emancipation. The march has most always been remembered as the campaign that conquered the South, as the final nail in the Confederate coffin, but this underlying battle between soldiers and enslaved people is where the march derived its most profound meaning: Americans, after all, are no longer fighting the Civil War, but we are indeed still living in the aftermath of slavery.

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It all started—perhaps appropriately so—with a fire. For the better part of four days, from November 11th through the 15th, Atlanta burned once more. Billows of smoke rose high overhead, and the flames reduced city blocks to ash and rubble. “FIRE! FIRE!! FIRE!!! In every corner of the city,” wrote one soldier. Another compared the flames to “ocean waves” roiling the city and “struggling upward like a thousand banners in the sky.” Contrary to local lore and

popular mythmaking, Sherman never intended on burning Atlanta completely to the ground. Instead, he ordered a selective destruction of all the city's "military assets"—every arsenal, storage house, rail depot, foundry, and factory. Fire, he told his chief engineer, Orlando Poe, would do the trick, but he instructed Poe not to use fire "until toward the last moment." But orders or not, the city still burned. Exploding buildings sparked conflagrations that spread from structure to structure, and rowdy, uncontrollable men took matters into their own hands, torching shops and stores while singing along to the sound of "John Brown's Body." Sherman even remembered shell fragments landing near his own headquarters—a startling signal that the full breadth of the blaze had gone beyond control. By the morning of the 14th, the devastation was enough for David Conyngham to describe Atlanta as a "thing of the past." The next morning, the 15th, with Atlanta still smoldering and a pall of smoke lingering in the air, the March to the Sea began.⁵⁹

Chapter Two

The Politics of the Plantation

On the 13th of November, as Atlanta burned and the army readied itself for the march through Georgia, Henry Hitchcock paced across a livestock stable in Marietta, perhaps not far from Monemia Johnson's storehouse door. With horses braying and bleary-eyed stable-boys just

⁵⁹ Harvey Reid, *The View From Headquarters: Civil War Letters of Harvey Reid*, ed. Frank L. Byrne (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1965), 202; John J. Hight, *History of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment Indiana Volunteer Infantry: Its Organization, Campaigns, and Battles from 1861-1865* (Princeton: Press of the Clarion, 1895), 411; *O.R. Ser. 1. Vol. 39., Pt. 3*, 681, 741. Sherman, *The Memoirs of William T. Sherman*, 111; Conyngham, *Sherman's March Through the South*, 238. Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 241-242.

now starting their day, he likely tapped his feet and checked his watch. He may have even cursed a time or two. It was his first assignment, and he was already late. Worse, if he dawdled any longer, he would miss what was sure to be the grandest campaign of all and miss his chance to witness it while riding along with the general and his staff. It was an opportunity the budding legal scholar couldn't afford to miss. His duties as a member of the Missouri Convention had already kept him from much of the war, and if it wasn't for a friend, who pulled some strings and got him assigned as one of Sherman's staff officers, he might have missed the war completely. Instead, he now found himself serving, in effect, as Sherman's personal scribe: "Pray don't think me likely to turn Boswell to any man's Johnson," he wrote his wife, a reference to the famed English writer and his distinguished biographer, but modesty aside, Hitchcock knew that this was his chance to claim a piece of the war. In truth, this was his only way: He was about as useful on the battlefield as a screen door on a submarine. But he could write and write well—and that was still good for something.⁶⁰

He was getting angry now. He had been up before dawn and knew he had to leave by a quarter to seven, but Aleck was nowhere to be found. Like many officers of his rank and position, Hitchcock hired a personal manservant before leaving on the march. Mostly all male and mostly all formerly enslaved, manservants—or *valets*—were commonplace among the traveling caravan that was the U.S. army. They helped dress their bosses, carried along personal belongings, built fires, cared for horses—did all the things that made camp life less of a burden. Hitchcock hired Aleck as a valet the night before and had given him time to arrange safe passage for his family—"his wife, Laura, mother, Amy, and three children"—out of town. He had also

⁶⁰ Henry Hitchcock, M.A. DeWolfe, ed., *Marching with Sherman: Passages from the Letters and Campaign Diaries of Henry Hitchcock, Major and Assistant Adjutant General of Volunteers, November 1864-May 1865* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 30.

promised to help Aleck and his family afterward if Aleck served faithfully, but on this morning, Aleck's first day on the job, a future relationship did not look promising. Then suddenly in the blink of an eye, Aleck arrived "running, breathless" and with "traces of tears." He had been at the depot to see his wife and family onto the rail cars before they left for Chattanooga. "Disarmed" but also a bit relieved, Hitchcock just told him to "hurry up now." The army wouldn't wait.⁶¹

When the dust settled and firing ceased Hitchcock got what he wanted. He got his taste of the war and got to taste it while marching into history. He saw it all—Georgia, the Carolinas, even the Grand Review in Washington, D.C.—and he recorded his experience in a campaign diary that has become an indispensable record of the March. And Aleck? Aside from the occasional compliment or complaint, Aleck remained mostly invisible throughout. Hitchcock often commented on the enslaved people he met while serving on the general's staff, but he never stopped to offer more than a line or two about Aleck or muse about what Aleck thought of it all. Yet the basic fact of the diary is that Hitchcock wrote himself into history while riding first-class on the back of Aleck's labor, which gave him the comfort to collect his thoughts and the time to write, thus preserving the March for all posterity. First of all, Aleck deserves our many thanks, but it is also worth remembering that innumerable freed men just like him toiled away for those documenting the war. In fact, Hitchcock once even referenced conversations with George Ward Nichols, a fellow staff officer and diarist, about the relative strengths of their two servants, Aleck and Sam. Any history of the March owes as much to them and their labor as those who wrote it all down.⁶²

⁶¹ Ibid., 49-50.

⁶² Ibid., 139.

Still, the better question about Aleck is not *where* but *why*? Why would he, presumably a free Black man, leave his wife and children to serve at the behest of white officer embarking on a destination-less journey through the heart of the still war-torn South? Money was likely a factor. The allure of military service probably was too. Yet considering that a stray bullet could end the promise of payment and considering that, in this case, service meant shouldering a saddle bag instead of a gun, neither of these factors alone explain why Aleck left his wife and family. For him to do that, he had to have been moved by something else, something big enough to pull him into the war, and maybe, just maybe, that something was the need to aid the army as a way ending the war and ending slavery? Perhaps. The truth is we don't know why Aleck left and probably never will, but we do know this: for Aleck to take such a drastic and unknown step, he must have felt as if he was on the verge of something momentous, as if some great opportunity knocked, and he just had to take it, or at least do his part. In that sense, he and Hitchcock, his new employer, shared one thing in common: They both knew that the next campaign was one they couldn't miss.

In some respects, Sherman's great march through Georgia lived up to these expectations. It *was* momentous: sixty-thousand troops marching in wings spread out over thirty miles; little to no resistance; an entire state government toppled; a plantation system wrecked and ruined; countless pounds of goods requisitioned, pigs stolen, and scores of homes burned; an immobilized Confederate citizenry devastated by the strength of the federal force; a landscape trampled and changed; and, most of all, tens-of-thousands of enslaved men and women experiencing freedom for the first time. In hindsight, the whole thing was almost epochal. Not only did the March ring in the last curtain call of the Confederacy, the combined movement of soldiers and enslaved people along those wagon-rutted roads gave rise to one of the largest

emancipation events in the near four-hundred-year history of Atlantic slavery and certainly the largest, up to that point, in American history. Even more, coming when it did, in late 1864, the march from Atlanta to the sea all but ensured slavery's American death, thus laying the groundwork for a new and finally free nation to rise from the ruins of war. Little wonder then that both Aleck and Hitchcock felt such an urge to follow the army out of Atlanta. History was in the making, and they had to see it through.

And yet, on the ground, the campaign was never as auspicious as that. The fog of war hung over the March and followed the army wherever it went, casting a dark and confusing pall over the Georgia countryside. Hitchcock, for one, recoiled at the violence of it all and he couldn't believe the lack of discipline, evidenced by the fact that Sherman and his subordinates basically gave up on trying to police instances of excessive force and wanton plunder. Moreover, emancipation never equated to refuge, at least in any official capacity, which trapped the enslaved in an ill-defined relationship with the army. Always unequal and tilted toward the white men with guns, it was a relationship perfused with violence and punctuated by constant confusion over what emancipation meant. But despite this confusion, enslaved people along the March did just as Aleck had done in Marietta and claimed the campaign as their own. They wrote meaning into the army's movements, and became not just active participants in the March but a kind-of underlying force propelling the campaign forward. For much of the March's history, these labors have remained mostly forgotten, but like Aleck and all his work, they were what made the March so historic.

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If in the Atlanta Campaign the sound of guns roaring in the distance alerted enslaved people to the approach of the army, along the March to the Sea, it was clouds of smoke. "Dense

volumes of smoke can already be seen looming up in massive billows to the skies,” wrote a private from Illinois, explaining that the smoke was often the “most truthful indicator” of the army’s whereabouts. “At times the whole circle of the horizon is dark with smoke that arises from fires,” wrote another, casting blame on those dead Georgia pines that catch fire and send “writhing flames” up to their “topmost branches.” Some of the smoke was probably spill-over from the blaze that seared Atlanta. On the first days out, thick wisps of smoke rolled by as the army marched from the once bustling railroad hub. But as the long blue columns moved further into Georgia signs of fire coordinated the army’s movements, letting units track the progress of their peers. Another chimney of smoke signaled another piece of property destroyed, painting the sky like some soot-colored chessboard of war. For the enslaved, who anxiously monitored the army’s movements, those same thick clouds signaled that the army was slowly circling in and that soldiers would soon swarm all around, which made pillars of smoke signs of freedom and signs of terror all at once.⁶³

The first enslaved communities to see smoke filtering out onto the horizon were those to the south and east of Atlanta. Coming out of the city, the army’s two wings, split into two corps each, moved more like four legs rummaging along corresponding paths. Henry Slocum’s left wing, made up of the 14th and 20th corps, took the more easterly route. The plan was for his columns to head straight for Decatur, just east of Atlanta, before gently sloping south toward Conyers, Madison, and Eatonton. Somewhere around Milledgeville, the state capitol, he was to start angling his lines down toward Savannah and the thick, swamp-like channels of the Savannah River. O.O. Howard’s right wing—the 15th and 17th corps—took the other route,

⁶³ George Sharland, *Knapsack Notes of General Sherman’s Grand Campaign Through the Empire State of the South* (Springfield, Il: Jackson & Bradford, 1865), 34; S.F. Fleharty, *Our Regiment: A History of the 102nd Illinois Infantry Volunteers, with Sketches of the Atlanta Campaign, the Georgia Raid, and the Campaign of the Carolinas* (Chicago: Brewster and Hanscom, 1865), 121.

marching due south before turning back to the southeast. The route passed his wing through Jonesboro and Jackson and then Clinton further to the south. The idea was to make a slight feint on Macon, positioned in the dead-center of the state, before bowing east for Savannah with the rest of the army. Up until about Macon and Milledgeville, the two hinges on which the March swung, each wing's respective paths ran them headlong into the inner most marrow of the Georgia Black Belt, an immensely fertile region named for its abundant layers of airy black topsoil, which is to say that each wing marched right down into the pith of Georgia's slave system.⁶⁴

But the army didn't need to march that far to see slavery, for enslaved people were, inexorably, marching toward the army. Sherman and his staff had no-sooner escaped Atlanta's burnt-out shadow before this reality set in. On the first day's march, on a roadside just past Decatur, Sherman and his gaggle of traveling officers met an enslaved man, who explained that two of his peers had already run to the army and that he heard one was killed during the fight at Jonesboro. Hitchcock wrote that the man was now "*in possession*," which meant that he was either impressed into service or allowed to join the army on his own accord. But perhaps the most salient part of the encounter was less that the man *came* to the army and even less that he *joined* the army, "*in possession*" or otherwise, and more that he told Sherman and the staff that he thought himself worth "\$100,000."* Consider that for a moment: The man appraised himself. He was likely demonstrating his worth in an attempt to convince Sherman to let him come along,

⁶⁴ See Anne J. Bailey, *War and Ruin: William T. Sherman and the Savannah Campaign* (Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources, 1992). On Georgia's slave population, in 1860 Georgia reported a slave population of 462,198. The counties that had seen the most drastic expansion of slavery in years leading up to the Civil War were those located in the central Georgia cotton belt. See Watson Jennison, *The Cultivation of Race: The Expansion of Slavery in Georgia, 1750-1860* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2012); Joseph P. Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Ralph Betts Flanders, *Plantation Slavery in Georgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933).

but the point is that the man did so by leveraging the value that he knew hung over his head. It was an example of the chattel principle—the idea that the enslaved were “living property” or a “people with a price”—in action and an example of exactly what was at stake in the army seeing emancipation through.⁶⁵

Indeed, the man’s self-appraisal serves as a stark reminder that emancipation is a story about how slavery died as much as a story about how people became free. Admittedly, this is a fine distinction. Hitchcock certainly didn’t understand it, at least not at first. But he began to see it and understand it whenever he scanned the faces of the white women he encountered while riding along with the army. Somewhere between Lithonia and Conyers, for example, he met a thirty-five-year-old widow, a Mrs. Scott, who told him all sorts wild rumors about what the federal army reportedly did to enslaved people in Atlanta. “First, she said she believed it,” he explained, but then, as if conceding defeat, she let the façade slip and admitted that “she did not, but said they wanted the negroes to believe it,” revealing that it was all a ploy to keep the enslaved from running away. A day later, when he marched into town, he noticed there were few men and mostly all white women and children lined up along front gates and doorways, “sullen,” he wrote, while the enslaved looked “pleased.” Mrs. Scott later explained why, telling him “the niggers are the only free ones now—whites all slaves,” a comment exposing the central conceit of the Confederacy: that those born into mastery could confuse someone else’s freedom for their own enslavement.⁶⁶

⁶⁵Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 61. On Chattel Principle, see Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 20-21.

*This value of 100,000 dollars is an exaggeration of the actual market price for enslaved people. The average price of a slave in 1860 was around \$800. See Samuel Williamson and Louis P. Cain. "Measuring Slavery in 2020 dollars," *MeasuringWorth*, 2021.

⁶⁶ Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 64,66.

Hitchcock, though, perhaps didn't fully understand what it meant for slavery to die until he started speaking with the enslaved. When doing so became a regular occurrence, the institution's routine barbarity became hard to ignore—much like the time when a freed man told Sherman's staff that they were walking along a railroad line built by enslaved people, most all of whom were later killed and buried, unmarked, in a neighboring set of woods. Even more shocking for Hitchcock in those early days was what he heard at plantation near the Alcovy River just outside Covington. It was a place owned by a Judge Harris, an actual judge and owner of "sixty or more slaves." At first, the visit was a pleasant surprise. A handful of enslaved men had escaped from a nearby plantation and arrived willing to share their stories, which Hitchcock—a trained lawyer with a knack for deposing witnesses—took full advantage of, using the occasion to hold what amounted to an unofficial inquiry into how enslaved people viewed the war.⁶⁷

Hitchcock wasted little time. He immediately pressed one of the men on if he believed all the rumors of what the army did to enslaved people in Atlanta: "No sir!" the man replied, "We has faith in you." He then asked another why he ran away given all the risk involved: "I was bound to come," the man said, "good trade or bad trade, I's bound to risk it," he went on, telling Hitchcock that the "[local whites] don't think nothing 'bout here of tying a feller up and givin' him 200 or 300 *with the strap*." Another enslaved man explained that he ran because he caught word of his master and his family preparing to "run off all their negroes down to Macon and thence to Florida." When told to go saddle-up the horse that morning, the man saddled the horse, but instead of waiting "rode over to the Yankees himself." Yet what Uncle Stephen said impressed Hitchcock the most. A man enslaved by Judge Harris, Uncle Stephen was reluctant at

⁶⁷ Ibid., 66

first, but then explained to the staff exactly what he thought of the war, saying that it was “mighty distressin’,” but that “*the right thing couldn’t be done* without it.” To Hitchcock, a war-booster at heart, this was what he wanted to hear, and he ate it up, writing “the old fellow hit it, exactly.”⁶⁸

Then, as Hitchcock and the others were preparing to leave, the mood among the staff grew darker and more indignant. George Ward Nichols, one of Hitchcock’s colleagues, had a long talk with the plantation’s “driver.” Drivers were typically enslaved men charged with the tricky task of regulating the work of their peers while reporting back to the master or overseer, which sometimes placed them in leadership positions within a slave community—and sometimes alienated them from the community depending on how they handled their role. In this case, the man was trusted enough to speak for the enslaved women on the plantation. He told Nichols, who told the rest of the staff, that despite being elderly and having a family, Judge Harris “obliges” the enslaved women to “submit to him, and *straps* them if they refuse,” an admission that shocked the staff. Also, on top of learning that Judge Harris was a serial rapist, Hitchcock and others discovered why one of the older men on the place had but one leg. Apparently, Harris’s wife, the plantation mistress, shot him, “deliberately,” over an issue with how the man planted some potatoes—and for that, he lost a leg. From then on, Hitchcock remained troubled by acts of wanton foraging while on the March, but he became less bothered by the misery the army inflicted on the white population. The war needed winning, he knew, but more specifically, slavery had to die.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ibid., 70-71.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 72. On slave drivers, see John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 258-260, 316.

Elsewhere in those early days, enslaved communities greeted Sherman's columns as if slavery was already dead. In McDonough, just south of Atlanta, one Ohioan recorded that as the army passed into town enslaved people went "wild with joy." Another wrote that "so far as the negroes were concerned, they seemed overjoyed to see us." While the enslaved tended to err on the side of caution, on street corners and in town squares excitement simply spilled over, often showing itself in the form of raucous street performances and collective celebrations. Add in the fact that so many of these encounters happened alongside military bands, hoisted flags, not to mention horses and lines of marching soldiers, and the March seemed at times like one grand emancipatory parade. "The bands played as the column marched through the town, attracting crowds of negroes, who often joined the marching column, sure that their day of freedom had arrived," remembered a soldier with the Fifty-Fifth Ohio. Another remembered seeing enslaved people crowding around the edges of the road, looking up and down the lines of soldiers, marveling at the numbers of men passing through. A Pennsylvania veteran painted a similar picture, writing that "the [enslaved] men doffed their hats" amid "shouts of 'Glory to God' and 'Bless the Lord.'"⁷⁰

All the shouts, prayers, and praise placed a spirit of revival over the whole affair. The catharsis—the feeling of release, not just the physical and emotional release of one's own enslavement, but of history, of escaping four-hundred years of human bondage—was real, and

⁷⁰ Joseph A. Saunier, *A History of the Forty-Seventh Regiment Ohio Veteran Volunteer Infantry. Second Brigade, Second Division, Fifteenth Army Corps, Army of the Tennessee* (Hillsboro, Ohio: Lyle Printing Co., 1903), 352; Hosea W. Rood, *Story of the Service of Company E, and of the Twelfth Wisconsin Regiment, Veteran Volunteer Infantry, in the War of the Rebellion* (Milwaukee: Swain and Tate, Co., 1893), 360; Hartwell Osborn, *Trials and Triumphs: The Record of the Fifty-Fifth Ohio Volunteer Infantry* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1904), 177; Jefferson Brandt, *History of the Eighty-Fifth Indiana Volunteer Infantry, its Organization, Campaign and Battles* (Bloomington, IN: Craven Bros, 1902), 78. John Richards Boyle, *Soldiers True: The Story of the One Hundred and Eleventh Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers and of its Campaigns in the War for the Union, 1861-1865* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1903), 262.

religion was the only medium powerful enough to hold the kind of profound meaning the enslaved ascribed to the moment. It tapped a deep root. For centuries, enslaved people in the U.S. and other parts of the Americas had been fashioning and refashioning elements of Christianity in accordance with their own needs and world view. For some, religion was a form of resistance. Escaping into the woods in the heat of the night to worship free of a white master was a way of building community, of worshipping together, and of expressing the humanity slavery was designed to deny them. For others, it was a pillar of hope and promise of some future reckoning. Just as God had done with the Israelites, leading them out of bondage and away from Egypt, so, too, he would do for the enslaved of America. And like the God of the Old Testament promises, he would one day return and right the world according the plan he pledged for his people. Such were some of the deep, long-held beliefs on which the worldview of the enslaved revolved.⁷¹

It makes sense, then, that as the March unleashed the joys of emancipation, it kindled a religious experience. “The whole land seemed to be inhabited by negroes,” wrote Boyle, the Pennsylvanian, “and the appearance of the army inspired them with a profound religious sentiment and awakened in them the most extraordinary religious emotion.” “They were frantic with joy,” remembered Adin B. Underwood of Massachusetts, writing that it was almost as if the enslaved “heard about it [the March], yearned for it, and were warned by some underground telegraph that the day of the Lord had come.” With this religious feeling permeating the lines, Sherman marched into what was practically his own deification. “Wherever Sherman rode, they

⁷¹ On slave religion, see Albert J. Rabateau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). See also, Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007 reprint); Sylvia Frey, Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[the enslaved] crowded about him shouting and praying with a touching eloquence,” wrote Underwood. Sherman would even write to his wife from Savannah, saying “It would amuse you to see the negroes; they flock to me, old and young, they pray and shout and mix up my name with Moses, and Simon, and other scriptural ones as well as ‘Abram Linkom,’ the Great Messiah of ‘Dis Jubilee.’”⁷²

To be clear, there’s a mocking tone to Sherman’s description of how enslaved people regarded him, and there’s more than a little white saviorism at work in the self-significant way soldiers like Boyle and Underwood remembered the religious enthusiasm of the enslaved. These things cannot be ignored. But the religious feeling that pervaded the March, even if aped and contorted by white soldiers, deserves dwelling on because it shows that enslaved people experienced emancipation as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. George Ward Nichols explained as much, saying explicitly that “the majority [of enslaved people] accept the advent of the Yankees as the fulfillment of millennial prophecies.” This religious millennialism, it turns out, was more than a recurring theme; it was the keynote of the entire March, and this idea of ‘Jubilee’ represented central cord—the central metaphor, if you will— tying the experience together. The idea appears everywhere: a foreign correspondent reported that enslaved people welcomed the soldiers while proclaiming that “de day of jubilee hab arribed!”; another soldier diarized that “while the whites are in perfect consternation, the blacks hail our approach as the day of Jubilee”; and perhaps most evocatively, another soldier reported that in Eatonton as the

⁷² Boyle, *Soldiers True*, 262; Adin B. Underwood, *Three Years’ Service of the Thirty-Third Mass. Infantry Regiment, 1863-1865*. (Boston: A. Williams & Co. 1881), 243. Sherman, *The Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, 180. Sherman, *Home Letters*, 319.

“calaboose (jail) and whipping stocks were burned,” enslaved men and women “danced to see them in flames” all while “under the impression that the day of Jubilee had come.”⁷³

The idea took on such reverence because riding out of Atlanta, it seemed as if this day of Jubilee had indeed arrived. Not only were enslaved men and women escaping bondage, the whole March went off without a hitch. “Certainly this is the ‘perfection of campaigning,’” wrote Hitchcock in those first few days out. An Illinois soldier put it in more extravagant terms, calling the March “probably the most gigantic pleasure excursion ever planned.” The soldiers were all happy, triumphant, and living off the fat of the land; they were eating and drinking their weight in coffee, corn, ham, and some of the sweetest sweet potatoes on earth. But that was on the road and on the march, where the army’s movement obscured the work that made its pace and relative peace possible. Out on the farms and plantations of central and southeast Georgia, where foragers descended and did the work of crushing the Confederacy in mind, body, and spirit, there was a different version of the March breaking out at stops all along the route toward Savannah. In this space soldiers and enslaved people met on a much different footing and on a field of battle unlike any others in the history of the war, which casts the story of emancipation in a far more unstable and perilous light. Christ, you might remember, promised a return, but he also promised a struggle.⁷⁴

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⁷³ George Ward Nichols, *The Story of the Great March from the Diary of a Staff Officer* (New York: Harpers, 1865), 72. SHERMAN AND THE “GEORGIA NEGROES” *The Anti-Slavery Reporter: Under the Sanction of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society* (London, England) Feb. 1, 1865;; George S. Bradley, *Star Corps: Notes of an Army Chaplain During Sherman’s March to the Sea* (Milwaukee: Jeremiah & Brightman, 1865), 195; Samuel Hurst, *History of the Seventy-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry* (Chillicothe, OH: S.H. Hurst, 1866), 156.

⁷⁴ Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 110; H.H. Orendorf, et al. *Reminiscences of the Civil War from the Diaries of the 103rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry* (Chicago: J.F. Learning & Co., 1904), 148.

They had different names. Officially, Sherman and the War Department called them foragers. These were troops of soldiers organized into smaller foraging parties that would fan out from the main column to do what their name implies: they would forage for food and goods from nearby plantations and farms, which made them the foot soldiers in Sherman's plan to destroy the material base of the South. Unofficially, however, soldiers sometimes referred to them using the more colloquial term "bummers," except this more informal moniker is itself somewhat confusing. To some, the term "bummer" was a simple stand-in for forager. To others, "bummer" was a slight pejorative describing the foragers who went rogue. These were men or groups of men who broke protocol, cut-out away from the army or larger parties, and took the task of debilitating the Confederate home front into their own unrestrained hands. Complicating matters even further was that sometimes these so-called bummers were soldiers, and sometimes they were a class of men known as "stragglers" or "hangers-on"—which were not soldiers *per se*, but instead men who traveled with or behind the army in unofficial capacities and, like leaches, fed off the war while their vagrant status shielded them from oversight. Yet, all this in mind, perhaps most telling was that oftentimes these distinctions went unrecorded because the soldiers themselves couldn't distinguish one from the other, which speaks to the attendant chaos of the campaign.⁷⁵

Foraging fueled the army. Early each morning groups of soldiers as large as a hundred or more detached from the main column and roamed into the countryside, typically splitting into smaller groups as they went. They moved fast and with authority—"jest lak thunder," one enslaved woman remembered—before returning back to the roadside with all their bounty. "When the treasure-trove of grain, and poultry, and vegetables has been secured, one man was

⁷⁵ Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 267-268.

detailed to guard it until the proper wagon came along,” wrote one soldier, remembering how the foragers sat “upon some crossroad, surrounded with their spoils—chickens, turkeys, geese, ducks, pigs, hogs, sheep, calves, nicely dressed hams, buckets full of honey and pots of fresh lard.” Nearly all found central Georgia particularly plush. One soldier described it as the “granary of the South.” The men consumed an abundance of corn and sweet potatoes. They burned copious amounts of cotton, sometimes lighting gins and cotton houses on fire, and they even requisitioned stock animals like horses, mules, and cows. Foraging had happened elsewhere in the war but never in such a deliberate fashion and on such a large scale for such an extended amount of time.⁷⁶

To be fair, Sherman never intended for the March to be the kind of spasm of wanton plundering popular Civil War mythmaking sometimes makes it out as. A method underwrote the madness. Sherman maintained that foraging should be done “by the book.” As he outlined in his campaign orders, soldiers were not supposed to enter houses or commit trespass, only officers could order the burning of property, and, theoretically, there was a limit to how much foraging parties could take: they were supposed to only take what was needed to maintain three days’ worth of food. And though unwritten, the soldiers understood that they were to never assail non-combatants, unless, of course, something was done to merit swift vengeance, like firing upon foraging parties or actively resisting the army. Soldiers were to also make distinctions between poor farmers, who seemed defeated by the war and ready to switch loyalties, and the rich planters, who, on the whole, owned lots of slaves and property and continued to prop up the war

⁷⁶ W.P.A. Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Sarah Byrd, Vol. IV, Part I, 171; Connelly, *The History of the Seventieth Ohio Regiment*, 126; H.I. Smith, *History of the Seventh Iowa Veteran Volunteer Infantry During the Civil War* (Mason City, IA: E. Hitchcock, 1903), 304. See also, Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman’s Troops in the Savannah and Carolina Campaigns* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).

effort. These were the rules, and for the most part, the army tried to enforce them—at least at first.⁷⁷

But there were basic structural problems in place that failed to keep the foraging parties from slipping out of hand. For one, Sherman’s language was vague and contradictory. Despite laying out the rules for the March, he also, in the same orders, instructed his men to “forage liberally,” a phrase which the soldiers overwhelmingly took as a subtle wink and nod to take what they wanted. Furthermore, to use a sports metaphor, there were no real referees present, and even when there were, officers in charge of policing the March had a warring inclination to side with their men or simply look the other way, which led to all sorts of break downs in authority and protocol. Not to mention, each new plantation was like a different arena with different attenuating circumstances. Some were large and inhabited by white families and sizable slave populations; some were small and largely deserted except for the enslaved. Some had white families who had brothers and sons still fighting in the war; some had white families that had been wiped out and ruined. Some had all their foodstuffs out in the open; others were either destitute or had all their valuables and provisions hidden in some undisclosed location. Furthermore, some plantations had enslaved communities that reported fair or decent treatment while others reported cruel indignities. In a state of war and on a campaign like this one, factors like these often determined how ferocious the soldiers foraged and what happened when they did.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Quoted in Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 266. See also “Special Field Orders No. 120” in *O.R.* Ser. 1 Vol. 39. Pt. III, 713-714.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*; See also, Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 141.

Inevitably, too, there were moments along the March where the chaos of such a large body of men moving at such a rapid pace simply consumed the countryside, breaking down any semblance of order. Times like these were when the worst excesses and abuses occurred. “It is apparent that unprincipled men are taking advantage of the license given them to forage, and are pillaging,” wrote S.F. Fleharty of the 102nd Illinois in late November, after being on the road for more than two weeks. Similarly, Harvey Reid of the 22nd Wisconsin documented how hard it was to keep the plundering at bay, especially once official foraging parties left and the stragglers began playing by their own rules. “A guard is placed at every house we pass with order to admit no soldier, but he only remains while his division is passing,” he explained, writing “then come the trains accompanied by a thousand “bummers,”” who “ransack the house, taking every knife and fork, spoon, or anything else they fancy to, break open trunks and bureaus, taking women[‘s] or children’s clothing, or tearing them to pieces, trampling upon them and so forth besides taking everything eatable that can be found.” Eventually, because of the challenge outlined in Reid’s diary, Sherman and the army’s brass slowly stopped worrying over the conduct of the men. In their minds, there was little they could do to reign them in, and it was best to simply keep the army moving, a sort of tacit understanding that only increased the tumult happening along the lines of march.⁷⁹

Enslaved people had more than a few reasons to fear the foraging parties. The sight of armed white men alone was enough reason for caution. In addition, though the enslaved had their own sense of the war and what it was about, the reality of the war threw all the cards off the table. Even if enslaved people trusted the soldiers, they had no idea what would transpire when

⁷⁹ Fleharty, *Our Regiment*, 118; Harvey Reid, *Uncommon Soldiers: Harvey Reid and the 22nd Wisconsin March with Sherman*, eds. Frank L. Byrne, William H. McIntosh (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 203.

foragers arrived and started rifling through the plantation—or if a fight broke out right on their doorstep. There was also an issue of basic food scarcity. By 1864, after four long years of war and a debilitating blockade, some plantations, particularly those in the swampy, less-fertile pine barrens to the southeast, suffered serious food insufficiencies, and it was the enslaved who bore the brunt of the shortages. Conditions became so grim that Emma Hurley, a formerly enslaved woman from Wilkes County, remembered going to great lengths—like regrinding dirt from the smokehouse to collect extra salt—just to get by. There was thus a cruel irony at play: an approaching army could bring freedom, but scavenging soldiers could just as easily pick the place clean and leave an enslaved community destitute. All this is why for every celebration that broke out, equal numbers of men and women preferred exercising caution, which meant initially keeping the soldiers at arm’s-length. In these cases, emancipation in the path of Sherman’s army was about survival as much as freedom and the wide, sometimes gaping distance between the two.⁸⁰

Compounding the complexity of the situation was that as enslaved people watched, waited, and did their best to appraise the soldiers and their intentions, a war of whispers and rumors raged between them and their masters. It was a war that had been raging from as far back as Atlanta and was a common ploy used by planters from across the country. It typically hinged on white masters spreading word of wild and egregious stories about how the U.S. army treated the enslaved. One common tale held that during the battle of Atlanta, Sherman placed enslaved people at the front of the lines as cannon fodder and shot those who dared turned away; another conspiracy was that as the troops left Atlanta, they rounded up the enslaved and locked them inside burning buildings. There were additional stories of forced drownings and a constant

⁸⁰ W.P.A. Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Emma Hurley, Vol. IV, Part II, 277.

vilifying of all-things Yankee. “The terrorism, which forms so striking a feature of slavery, has had marked illustration since we left Atlanta,” wrote George Ward Nichols. “The negroes were told that, as soon as we got them into our clutches, they were put into the front of battle, and were killed if they did not fight; that we threw women and children into the Chattahoochee, and when the buildings were burned in Atlanta, we filled them with negroes to be roasted and devoured in flames,” he went on, describing the wide gamut of tales told about Sherman and his men.⁸¹

Hitchcock heard all these stories as well, yet whereas Nichols’s impulse was to laugh them off as absurd, Hitchcock took personal offense. He thought them impugning, dishonorable, and cheap—clear signs, he believed, of how slavery soiled the character of Southern whites, making them mean, low, and contemptibly desperate. Hitchcock’s assessment wasn’t all wrong, but his own sense of personal injury blinded him to how, in a setting as intimate as the plantation, information itself operated as a kind of weapon. White slaveholders knew that if they couldn’t control where the army went or whether enslaved people would make an escape, they could at least slow the dissemination of news and manipulate word of the war’s comings and goings. Sometimes this practice meant spreading wild rumors about the army, an attempt to wrench loyalty out of fear and terror; at other times, it meant keeping mums-the-word on things like the army’s whereabouts. George Ward Nichols—who, it should be said, was always a bit more clear-eyed and perceptive than Hitchcock, the moralist of the two—realized the extent of the issue when he met an enslaved woman just outside Covington. She told him she had never heard of the Emancipation Proclamation and explained that the white folks on the place

⁸¹ Nichols, *Story of the Great March*, 59. See also, Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 289.

engineered it that way by making sure to never speak of such things in the presence of the enslaved.⁸²

What white slaveholders were too conceited to realize, however, was this informational war was never as one-sided as they imagined. The enslaved tended to know way more about the war than they let on and were often one step ahead of those who enslaved them. Fenwick Hedley, an adjutant from Illinois, wrote that “in countless instances” enslaved people possessed news of the war in advance of the troops as well as the local whites. Hedley mentioned that this knowledge so amazed the soldiers that common folklore among the army held that the enslaved had some underground circuit of information relaying information across the South. Henry Hitchcock also came across a number of enslaved men and women who knew much more about the war than he ever thought. One woman, he wrote, knew all about “Burnside, McClellan, Sherman”—which suggests she knew all about the drama over the army’s high command and their search for competent leadership—as well as the Battle of Atlanta and reports of a recent assault there. He also met a group of enslaved men on a plantation near Millen whose spokesman was “perfectly aware of Lincoln’s Proclamation.” When asked about recent Confederate discussions about arming slaves, the man replied that he knew about that, too. Asked if he would fight for the Confederacy, the man bluntly shot back, “No sir—de day dey gives us arms, *dat day de war ends!*”⁸³

⁸² Nichols, *Story of the Great March*, 60.

⁸³ Fenwick Hedley, *Marching Through Georgia: Pen-Pictures of Everyday Life in General Sherman’s Army, from the Beginning of the Atlanta Campaign to the Close of the War* (Chicago: Donohue, Henneberry, Co. 1890), 312-313; Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 81, 128. On Confederate efforts to arm slaves, see Bruce Levine, *Confederate Emancipation: Confederate Efforts to Free and Arm Slaves During the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Given all that enslaved people knew, it's no surprise that the absurd stories about Yankee depredations typically fell on deaf ears. Some enslaved men and women believed them, but on the whole, most cast them off for what they were: desperate acts of control. John Van Duser, one of the army's Chief Telegraph Officers, reported that a group of enslaved people from Conyers had been told that the army locked enslaved people inside burning buildings in Atlanta, but he concluded that "not a one of them [sic] believe such stories." For many, the logic was as simple as a kind-of 'enemy-of my enemy' rationale. "What would the Yankees want to hurt black men for?," one enslaved man explained to George Ward Nichols, as the March moved along, "Master hates the Yankees, and he's no friend to us. So we're the Yankees best friends." Others held a much more intuitive position, knowing full well that if slavery was the root cause of the war, emancipation was its clear consequence. It is also likely that local whites had already shot what little credibility they had left by the time the army marched through. One enslaved man told Hitchcock that his master insisted he would "wade in blood knee deep before the Yankees come here" but then ran off like a scalded dog once word came that the army roamed about nearby. Another joked about how all the slave-holding families were "very brave" and then just "*git up and dust*" as soon as the army drew near. When whites fled like this, the message was clear. The game was finally up.⁸⁴

Knowledge—be it of a place, a family, or even the army—was also important because it more than anything else armed enslaved people as active wartime agents. Take what happened whenever the army descended on a plantation and began foraging as an example. As was common across the South, whites along Sherman's march prepared for the army's arrival by

⁸⁴ John Van Duser, Charles T. Brockman, ed. "The John Van Duser Diary of Sherman's March from Atlanta to Hilton Head," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 53. No. 2 (June 1969), 222; Nichols, *The Story of the Great March*, 59. Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 66, 122.

their hiding valuables and foodstuffs. Men and women stored family heirlooms and food under floor boards. They ordered horses, cows, mules, and other farm animals out into corrals hidden deep in adjoining woods or swamps. White women even hid jewelry on their persons, sometimes stowing rings and necklaces deep down in a purse or sewing them into their petticoats. The most common technique, however, was to pile personal possessions and food in large trunks and then bury them out in either the fields or a family graveyard. Foraging parties were wise to the practice, so when soldiers arrived on a given plantation, the whole scene devolved into a glorified scavenger hunt. Soldiers checked corner closets and storehouses, they interrogated white families, and, most of all, they went about looking for signs of uprooted dirt. “It was amusing to see the foragers going around prodding the ground with their ramrods or bayonets, seeking for soft spots,” wrote an Ohio soldier, who once had the surprise of his life when he found a “live citizen” buried out in the fields with cache of goods and only his nose sticking up from the earth.⁸⁵

Ironically, though, few white families ever hid the items themselves. Instead, they forced their bondsmen and women to do it for them, which armed the enslaved with knowledge of where most everything had been hidden. Having this information in hand turned enslaved people into third-party brokers in the ongoing stand-off between foragers and local whites. If the soldiers appeared unfriendly or too intrusive, the enslaved could sit on what they knew, calculating that it was best to avoid men brandishing bayonets—even if it meant protecting the property of those that enslaved them. Or, if they had a mind to, the enslaved could tip the scales in favor of the army, which they overwhelmingly did at stops all along the March: “...We would

⁸⁵ John K. Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry, During the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865. Together with More than Thirty Personal Sketches of Officers and Men* (Portsmouth, OH: Blade Printing Co., 1900), 166.

have seen much harder times but for the colored people,” remembered a soldier in the 105th Ohio, “They hailed our arrival with pleasure and were ever willing to disclose hidden supplies and pilot us to distant swamps that concealed horses, mules, and forage.” “They [the enslaved] very readily tell us where anything is concealed, and they seem well pleased when we find various articles,” echoed George S. Bradley, a Chaplain marching with a Wisconsin regiment, just two nights after “some twenty negroes got together, took 40 of their masters mules and horses, and come over to us.” The enslaved “had been sent off into the swamps with them,” he explained, “but concluded that it would suit the Yankees pretty well to get a hold of such things, so they came in.”⁸⁶

Don’t let the casualness of the soldier’s words give the wrong impression. The effort on the part of enslaved people to reveal these hidden stores was a serious move that carried real significance. Oftentimes handing over concealed goods—or, rather, goods meant for concealment—occasioned a chance to escape the plantation and possibly join the army. One Indiana soldier caught a glimpse of this when he discovered a lone enslaved man sitting on a roadside at the head of a wagon loaded down with hams and pork shoulder. The man had been told to take his roving meat locker out into the woods away from the army, but instead, he rode off to the main road, hid in the sunken part of a ditch, and waited to fall in with the army. At other times, revealing the whereabouts of hidden treasures was less about making a break for freedom than it was joining material devastation of the men and women who enslaved them. This was a strategic move in the sense that aiding the foragers weakened the Confederate home front and thus hastened the end of the war, but it likely was also a little cathartic—a moment to finally

⁸⁶ Account from W.H. Forbis in Albion Tourgée, *The Story of a Thousand: Being a History of the Service of 105th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, in the War for the Union, from August 21, 1862 to June 6, 1865* (Buffalo: S. McGerald and Son, 1896), 356; Bradley, *Star Corps*, 188.

stick it to their masters and hit them where it mattered most. Such is why in addition to goods and supplies the enslaved also disclosed the location of gold, valuables, and even, in John Van Duser's experience, a cellar storing "five large demijohns, one of no 1 whiskey, and the rest Madeira wine."⁸⁷

Many of the stories also reveal just how shrewd enslaved people were in how they leveraged their positions and exploited what they knew. There were stories of enslaved people sometimes smiling, nodding, or even rolling their eyes while listening in on conversations between soldiers and local whites—in effect, letting their body language speak and influence the interaction. One particularly clever woman once even pulled a fast one on her mistress when instead of burying the family's guns in the "big, thick plum orchard," she wrapped them in coverlet on top of a bed, where she knew the soldiers would find them without much of a search. Everyone except the mistress had a big howl when the soldiers found them and then destroyed them by smashing them against the trees. In another instance, H.H. Tarr, a captain in the 20th Connecticut, had a planter lie to him about not owning any horses. Tarr was inclined to believe the man until a group of enslaved men later revealed that the planter had been lying and that just days earlier he had run the horses out into a nearby swamp. The men agreed to go get the horses and hand them over—but only on one condition. They would do so only if allowed to join the army along the march, which was their way of negotiating with the soldiers. Tarr readily agreed. The enslaved men soon returned from the woods running "fifteen head of stock" and "four of the best-bred racers."⁸⁸

⁸⁷ George Punttenney, *History of the Thirty-Seventh Regiment of Indiana Infantry Volunteers: It's Organization, Campaigns, and Battles, Sept. '61-Oct. '64* (Rushville, Ind.: Jacksonian Book and Job Department, 1896), 189; John Van Duser, "The John Van Duser Diary," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 223.

⁸⁸ Nancy Anne Balcom (Mrs. Iverson Branen), *Mrs. Iverson Branen Reminiscences*, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Microfilm Collection, Drawer 283, Box 18, 22; Account of H.H. Tarr in John W. Storrs,

Tarr's story deserves pausing over and telling at some length. A native of Connecticut, Tarr encountered the men who retrieved the horses during the second of two raids he led while on the March. Much to his own exhaustion, both turned into wild, multi-day affairs that carried him deep into the Georgia countryside. He lost comrades out in the field, and he likely would have lost his own life had it not been for the enslaved. During each of the excursions, enslaved men and women shepherded him from place to place and shielded him from potential threats. On the first, which he began on November 19th, he slipped stealthily behind enemy lines with help of "negro guides," who led him and his men down what he coarsely called "nigger paths." These were furtive trails cut out of the dense Georgia underbrush that the enslaved relied on to move between plantations without being spotted by patrollers, overseers, or, in this case, Confederate cavalry.

His first day out was a great success. He and his team alighted on multiple plantations, where they burned "\$150,000 to \$200,000" worth of cotton, destroyed several gins, and feasted on roast chicken. But they all slept in their boots for a reason. The next morning, the enslaved roused Tarr awake, letting him know that in the night a "large rebel force" had been spotted at a crossroads only a mile or so from where they slept. The warning didn't go unappreciated. "These negroes had, on their own hook, gone out beyond my own pickets and stood watch for our additional safety," he wrote, astonished at how the enslaved had acted as his guardians and perhaps saved his life.⁸⁹

As Tarr rushed to leave, the enslaved also told him where to find a "large corral of horses and mules" hidden well out in the woods, which he and his men went to immediately. They took

The Twentieth Connecticut: A Regimental History (Ansonia, Conn.: Press of the Nagatuak Valley Sentinel, 1886), 153.

⁸⁹ H.H. Tarr in Storrs, *The Twentieth Connecticut*, 151-152.

the livestock and set off, but the soldiers didn't travel alone. Enslaved people mounted the horses—Tarr tells us two Black men to every one horse—and headed out with the men, turning the foraging party into what the Connecticut captain somewhat sarcastically referred to as a “cavalcade,” which was good thing, too, for Tarr later discovered that having such a large number of mounted Black men riding with him gave off the appearance of a much larger force, as if a larger detachment of U.S. cavalry rode through the country instead of a small group of mounted infantrymen and a small posse of formerly enslaved people. Tarr realized what of having such an escort meant when they rode into Eatonton. Though he didn't tell formerly enslaved people that they were “in the face of the enemy,” he, his men, and the troop of mounted Black men burst into town and “made enough noise for an army corps,” which Tarr implies scared off the Confederates still lurking in town without even firing a shot. From there, they rode onto Milledgeville, Georgia's capitol, where they rejoined the main column. By then the city was a hollowed-out shell, stripped of everything useful and full of soldiers celebrating with a wild reverie.⁹⁰

That was the first of Tarr's excursions away from the main line. The second, launched only a day or so out of Milledgeville, proved as harried as the first, and it began just as the earlier one had, with the helping hand of enslaved guides. After being repelled back to the main column by a force of Confederate cavalry, Tarr and his troop of twenty-five men followed the guides into the woods, no doubt following a similar network of footpaths trammed into place by generations of enslaved people traveling in hushed steps between plantations. The company's first stop was at plantation owned by a General Robinson, the man with the horses. Once the negotiating men re-emerged with the “fifteen head of stock” and “four of the best-bred racers,”

⁹⁰ Ibid., 152.

the party moved out in a hurry. “I was advised by the negroes to get out quickly,” wrote Tarr, for some of the enslaved people told him that Robinson dispatched a messenger back to the nearest Confederate force just as soon as they had arrived. So Tarr, his team, and the enslaved people now traveling with him ducked back into the woods, with the enslaved guides leading the way. The next day, following a brief run-in with mounted Confederates, they stopped at some length on a plantation still run by a white mistress, and on two separate occasions, the enslaved pulled him aside to reveal where undisclosed items had been hidden. One search produced only a buried trunk full of trinkets and dresses; the other recovered a neighborhood’s worth of livestock hidden in a swamp. The troop returned the next day running what must have been an entire rodeo back to the army.⁹¹

Tarr’s adventures out onto the backroads and plantations of middle Georgia are narrated here because they demonstrate two important points. The first is that as agents in the war-effort enslaved people did way more than point fingers toward hidden plantation treasures. They partnered with the soldiers, offered their assistance when they could, and fought their own version of the war. The most obvious way they did so was by weaponizing their knowledge and providing it in the form of military intelligence. It was a phenomenon that happened at all stages of the March. The army’s high brass, even Sherman on occasion, routinely relied on intelligence from the enslaved, and for some soldiers, the information came unsolicited and just in the nick of time. On Thanksgiving morning, for instance, James Royall Ladd, a young Captain from Ohio, led a team out to a plantation where a day or so earlier Confederate militia captured a group foragers. Word was that everything had already been cleared out and that, at most, they might recover the bodies of their dead comrades. They found the place tucked away and shielded by

⁹¹ Ibid., 153-154.

tall shade trees and a garden. Ladd would have likely waltzed right up to the doorstep, but before arriving, they received information from the enslaved that the house might still be occupied—which it was. “No sooner had we come in sight than sure enough Johnny was there and commenced firing at the line approaching from the right,” wrote Ladd. A fight ensued. Bullets flew. Confederates fled and surrendered. And when everything stopped, Ladd’s men walked away without as much as a scratch.⁹²

The second is that so much of the knowledge enslaved people mobilized came from having an intimate understanding of the landscape. This makes perfect sense given the long history of slave politics. As the historian Stephanie Camp’s path-breaking work on slavery and resistance has shown us, “space matters.” Plantation owners sought to control space as a way of controlling slaves—hence, the presence of things like pass systems and patrols. Enslaved people, in turn, subverted this “geography of containment” by constructing “alternative ways of knowing and using plantation and Southern space.” They created what Camp called a “rival geography,” a term that had multiple applications. It could be as confidential as a secret set of paths leading to a worship site out in the woods, or it could be as open as a public market in a city like Charleston, where enslaved people swapped stories, sold goods, and spread news. Also, if the planter’s imagined space through fixed structures like grand Romanesque homes, fenced-in pastures, and visible symbols of control such as a stockade, a whipping post, or a slave pen, Camp suggests the enslaved rooted their rival geographies a protean sense of motion, for nothing blunted constraint better than reflexive movement. Clenched between white masters and a system built to confine,

⁹² James Royal Ladd, “With Sherman to the Sea,” *American Heritage*, December 1978, Vol. 30, No. 1, New York: American Heritage, Pub., 1978, 8.

turning to these spaces, Camp shows, is how the enslaved made lives for themselves within slavery's grip.⁹³

During the Civil War, enslaved people once again turned to these spaces, except this time they did so to bridge the gap between slavery and freedom. As Camp demonstrated in her own work, the rival geographies that sustained enslaved people during slavery opened new avenues to escape the plantation as the war raged on. A similar story unfolded along Sherman's march but with a slight amendment. Enslaved people not only used these spaces to chart their own paths to freedom, they used them to partner with the army and ensure its success. Enslaved men and women harnessed these spaces when disclosing the location of concealed valuables and goods, a transferal of resources that fueled the army as it marched on to Savannah. But beyond this material fight, enslaved people went further. Even with the very real dangers the army posed, enslaved people brought soldiers into these spaces, as friends and allies, so as to offer shelter, sustenance, and a tactical advantage. In doing so, they mobilized an entire infrastructure of knowledge that had existed on the margins of white society and thrust it right into the center of the war. And make no mistake: having access to the rival geography of the enslaved was a real advantage for Sherman and his men. It was like having a map that revealed a separate sphere of battle or a compass that led the army deep into the politics of the plantation, which, in a sense, was always Sherman's intended target.⁹⁴

Perhaps nothing demonstrates the value of this knowledge more than the reports of how enslaved people throughout Georgia safeguarded escaped prisoners back to U.S. army lines. It

⁹³ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 6-7.

⁹⁴ On the existence of such spaces, see also Anthony E. Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

was such a regular phenomenon, in part, because two confederate prisons lay on the periphery of Sherman's path: Andersonville, which lay the furthest from the March in Southwest Georgia, about sixty-miles south of Macon, and Camp Lawton in Millen, which the army passed just south of and dispatched detachments to try and overtake. There were also scattering of prisoners held in places like Charleston or Savannah or smaller garrisons spread out across Georgia and South Carolina. Having these prisons within its line of sight meant that the army experienced a constant trickling in of escaped prisoners the more its columns moved. The men arrived rough-hewn, emaciated, and with stories tell, often of how they would have never made it if not for the enslaved people that took them in and helped them elude capture. Many of the prisoners, in fact, arrived alongside their enslaved guides and later vouchsafed for their inclusion into the army's long blue lines.⁹⁵

Soldiers tended to sit wide-eyed, open mouthed, and in a state of awe as they listened to their bedraggled friends tell of their escapes and attribute it all back to enslaved people. "The colored race here as elsewhere had been the truest friends of those who were unfortunate enough to taste the woes of captivity," wrote one soldier, recalling the time two escapees arrived at the army accompanied by an older enslaved man and his mule. The man had apparently "hidden them in the swamps and fed them for weeks" before ushering them back to the army, shirking what must have been a labyrinth of patrolled roads and avoiding the ever-present threat of Confederate cavalry. It was a dangerous proposition, slaves helping escapees. Capture could have easily meant death, for the enslaved as well the soldiers, and it often required real feats of endurance and guile, times where the enslaved stretched their rival geographies to their outermost limits. Speaking of the enslaved, Lucius Barber, a soldier and diarist, wrote that "They

⁹⁵ Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 262.

have been known in hundreds of cases to secrete and feed them [escapees] for months.” Another soldier remembered the plight of Captain Roberts of Illinois, who, after spending almost a full year bouncing from one prison to the next, escaped from a camp in Columbia, South Carolina and with the help of two enslaved men traveled ten nights and some one hundred and eighty miles back to Sherman’s line of march. Ten nights, the man specifically remembered, because the fugitives reportedly slept in swamps during the day and moved only by the pale of the moon.⁹⁶

Thus the effusions of praise: “So it was through three states,” wrote John Richards Boyle, when he reflected back on the March from North Carolina, “Every black face was the face of a friend, every black hand was wide open with the proffer of its little all...every black man’s poor cabin was a city of refuge for a hunted or imperiled Union soldier.” Another soldier spoke for himself and the rest of his regiment when he wrote that Black people were “always our faithful allies and friends.” Charming. Racial reconciliation occurring amidst the backdrop of war and along the lines of one of our nation’s most formative moments makes for a good story, but it’s a shiny object that distracts from one of the central storylines of the March—which is that the presence of the army occasioned a reckoning. Past became prologue; history revolutionized the present. The underground world of enslaved politics—a politics forged in the long history of slavery—burst forth alongside the army and became a force of its own, pushing and guiding the columns on toward Savannah, the end of the war, and the death of slavery. It happened here on the ransacked farms of Georgia with a particular vigor and significance, but similar mobilizations

⁹⁶ *The Story of the Fifty-Fifth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, 1861-1865*. (Clinton, Mass: W.J. Coulter, 1887), 401; Lucius W. Barber, *Army Memoirs of Lucius D. Barber, Company “D,” 15th Illinois Volunteer Infantry. May 24, 1861, to Sept. 30, 1865*. (Chicago: J.M.W. Jones Stationary, 1894), 172; Ambrose D. Leib, *History of the Seventh Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry, From its First Muster into the U.S. Service, April 15, 1861, to its Final Muster Out, July, 9, 1865* (Springfield, Ill: Illinois Journal Co., 1868), 285. See also, Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 135-136.

happened throughout the war, which circles back to Camp's final conclusion: "The rival geographies created by the enslaved over generations offered, in wartime, the literal roads to freedom."⁹⁷

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The fires never ceased. The smell of charred cotton filled the air. Clouds of smoke smothered the horizon. The army did its work. "The whole country is clouded with smoke," wrote one soldier round about Milledgeville, concluding that "This mighty army is making a terrible sweep." "The country through which we passed is terribly scourged," wrote another, noting that "everything combustible is in a blaze." Homes burned, but the bulk of the smoke came from cotton houses: "Our men burned all cotton gins and presses that have cotton in them, day after day as the column moved along," wrote a soldier with the 34th Illinois. "Many of the people say the Confederacy is played out," the soldier suggested. But like any old banty rooster about to die, southern whites could still strike back. Civilians sometimes shot soldiers, and at one stop, soldiers found comrades dead, their throats cut, with cards pinned that read: "Death to all Foragers."⁹⁸

Ira Berlin, one of our nation's foremost scholars of slavery, once wrote, "Born of violent usurpation, slavery would—and perhaps only could—die in that same bloody warfare." The March was a reflection of this necessity gone haywire. The violence of the March was ever

⁹⁷ Boyle, *Soldier's True*, 263; 92nd Illinois Infantry Regiment, *Ninety-Second Illinois Volunteers* (Freeport, Ill: Journal Steam Publishing, 1875), 181; Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 138.

⁹⁸ Leib, *History of the Seventh Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 280; Fleherty, *Our Regiment*, 121; Edwin Payne, *History of the Thirty-Fourth Regiment of Illinois Volunteer Infantry* (Clinton, IA: Allen Printing Co., 1903), 169; F.M. McAdams, *Every-day Soldier Life, or a History of the One Hundred and Thirteenth Volunteer Infantry* (Columbus: C.M. Cott, 1884), 120.

present and wielded in a variety of forms. Soldiers carried rifles, revolvers, and bayonets. They lit fires, requisitioned food under the force of arms, and stormed plantations. What after all was the entire army—some 60,000 souls and an ungodly number of horses, wagons, ambulances, engineers, and artillery brigades wheeling around screeching cannons and live ammunition—if not a moving monopoly of violence? There was also a smattering of Confederate militia and Joseph Wheeler’s phantom-like band of Confederate cavalry to contend with. The militia men carried guns of their own, probably old family rifles or pot-shot relics from wars past; Wheeler’s men rode mounted on horseback, which allowed them to hover around the army and strike fast—sometimes sweeping up soldiers or escaped slaves in short, pell-mell raids, where sabers and side arms were the usual weapons of choice. Throw into this mix the presence of slave catchers, stragglers, and the vengeful glare of southern whites, and it is easy to see why enslaved people tended to bet on caution. Threats lurked all around and could come from any direction at any time.⁹⁹

Even the dogs weren’t safe. One of the most frequently recorded and oft-talked about acts all along the March was the ritual killing of canines that took place on plantations within Sherman’s path. Though dark and disturbing, killing dogs was a widespread, even celebrated, phenomenon. Escaped prisoners reported that Confederate patrols tracked fugitives with hounds and hunting dogs; the enslaved reported much of the same, informing the soldiers that those plantation pets haunted the dreams of anyone who dared runaway. So, they killed them. “The foragers never spared them [the dogs], but killed them on sight,” wrote one soldier. “Permission was given in orders to kill them, wherever found,” wrote another. One Ohioan distinctly remembered a plantation where “the house, cotton gin, press, corn ricks, stable, everything that

⁹⁹ Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3.

could burn was in flames, and in the door-yard lay several dead bodies of blood-hounds that had been used to track and pull-down negroes and our escaped prisoners.” “Wherever our army has passed, everything in the shape of a dog has been killed,” he concluded. Hitchcock remembered several of these instances as well: “I have repeatedly seen dead dogs (just shot) lying by the roadsides and in yards,” he wrote in early December, revealing that of all cotton burned and food stolen, of all the gun-fights and miles marched, one of the most distinctive features of the March was that it left about a two hundred and fifty mile stretch of road littered with the lifeless bodies of dead dogs.¹⁰⁰

The mournful yelps of dying dogs aside, the violence of the March could also just as easily present itself in ways more subtle and subdued, though no less traumatic. One example of this more understated form of violence was that freedom occasioned reflection. Because Sherman’s men asked questions and had a penchant for conversing with the enslaved, enslaved people often found themselves reliving past traumas while thinking ahead to freedom. Inquiries about a particular master or mistress brought back recollections of whippings, beatings, and slave sales; other questions about why certain enslaved men and women looked as white as the soldiers meant recalling long repressed histories of serial rape. Painful memories also came up in conversation unsolicited like some long-awaited expurgation of withheld pain and suffering, a moment to vent and voice one’s trauma right there as the March moved along. The sense of standing on the edge of freedom likely had something to do with these reflections on past

¹⁰⁰ Charles E. Belknap, *Recollections of a Bummer*, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, War Papers, No. 28, 7; Henry Wright, *A History of the Sixth Iowa Infantry* (Iowa City: State Historical Society, 1924), 372; Thomas Stevenson, *History of the 78th Regiment O.V.V.I. From Its “Muster in” to its “Muster Out.”* (Zanesville, OH: H. Dunne, 1865), 317; Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 143. See also, Tyler D. Parry, Charlton W. Yingling “Slave Hounds and Abolition in Americas,” *Past & Present*, Vol. 246, No. 1. (Feb. 2020), 69-108.

traumas, but nevertheless, enslaved people all along the march experienced emancipation by also remembering slavery.

Henry Hitchcock witnessed one of these solemn moment reflections while camped out on the plantation of John Bertram Jones, a prosperous, Yale educated attorney and planter from Herndon, a small village near Augusta. Foraging parties had not burned the house, but when the question of burning the plantation home came up in conversation, Louisa, the enslaved “mammy” figure to the Jones children, told Hitchcock bluntly, “It ought to be burned.” “Why?,” he asked. “Cause there has been so much devilment here,” she said, recalling her own whippings and the fifteen years’-worth of times she had seen friends and family beaten with a paddle or a strap.¹⁰¹

As Louisa’s recollection makes all too clear, slavery was a violent institution. As both a social and legal system, chattel slavery legitimized an enslaver’s use of force over enslaved people. A plantation, in turn, was a planter’s personal fiefdom, a place where ruling white masters retained their own monopoly of violence and could exercise this monopoly how they wanted and when they wanted—almost like a state unto themselves. It was the central fact that fueled the plantation system. Violence, or the threat of, sped the pace of cotton picking, disciplined work routines, punished truant or recalcitrant slaves, and satisfied the thirst for things every Southern slaveholder wanted but could never quite attain—absolute control and complete submission.

It wasn’t just male masters, either. Female mistresses wielded their own forms of domination. They whipped and beat enslaved men and women, and as domestics who inhabited intimate household space with enslaved cooks and servants, white women were often the ones

¹⁰¹ Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 122-123.

who reproduced the repeated, day-to-day acts of violence on which the plantation household ran. Children too. White plantation children imbibed the lessons of slaveholding and were expected to preserve the family's claim to mastery, which meant replicating the violence of their mothers and fathers. Slavery, in short, bred a culture of violence. It created a society in which things like public hangings, whipping posts, and coffles of enslaved men and women chained together were not just unfortunate features of an unfortunate institution, but instead the bedrocks of Southern life. Alexander Stephens, the Vice-President of the Confederacy and himself a central Georgia slave-owner, said as much when he described slavery as the "cornerstone" of Southern civilization.¹⁰²

Southern whites, therefore, often responded to seeing this cornerstone crack and crumble exactly how one might expect, with more violence. One victim was a young mixed-race girl who wandered into camp late one evening after tracking and catching up to the army some thirty miles from her home. The men may have remembered her because when the army originally passed through the young girl revealed where her mistress hid the horses and mules, which the army promptly requisitioned and took along. What the soldiers discovered when the young girl later arrived was that after the they had left, the girl's mistress "took half a rail" and beat her so bad she broke the young girl's arm and, as the soldiers described it, "bruised her shamefully." Yet even as Southern whites like this particular mistress reacted in violence, they didn't always have to. History sat heavy on the mind of the living. Instances of past violence still carried a profound political weight, which meant that the mere threat of violence, backed up by a long history of violence, was often as politically expedient for Southern whites as actual, physical

¹⁰² See Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). See also, Alexander H. Stephens, "Cornerstone Speech," Savannah, Georgia. March, 21st. 1861. American Battlefield Trust: <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/primary-sources/cornerstone-speech>

shows of force. H.H. Tarr once glanced this immense power of the past during one his wild rides when he asked an enslaved man to reveal the location of a family's hidden livestock. The man refused, telling Tarr "I am too old to go with you'se, for good, and too young to stay here an' be murdered."¹⁰³

Yet this power of the past cut both ways, and the enslaved could sometimes harness it to wreak a kind of vengeance of their own. Hitchcock, for example, met an enslaved woman near Eatonton; it was the same woman who knew all about "Burnside, McClellan, Sherman" and the drama surrounding the U.S. army's high command. The woman, he discovered, had a child by her master, which unfortunately was an all-too-common occurrence in the plantation South. White masters forced themselves upon enslaved women and had enslaved children grow up alongside their free children. Except in this case the woman's mistress never had any children, resulting in what Hitchcock called a "Sarah and Hagar case only worse." As a consequence, the woman reported only ever receiving cruel treatment from her mistress—a situation that likely meant years of suffering repeated predations while living under the gaze of a jealous tormentor-turned-serial abuser.¹⁰⁴

Hitchcock never says so explicitly, but his diary implies that with this information in hand, the men "foraged liberally," even taking all the peanuts the mistress had drying on her shed. Later, he reported that the barn was ablaze, which he noted could have been set by fires lit to warm the men, but in any event, no one put it out and the whole thing kept burning. Are we to believe that the enslaved woman had this outcome in mind when she told Hitchcock her story?

¹⁰³ Orendorf, et al. *Reminisces of the Civil War from the Diaries of the 103rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 164; Tarr in Storrs, *The Twentieth Connecticut*, 154.

¹⁰⁴ Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 82.

Maybe. Maybe not. But her telling her story falls in line with a pattern set by her peers: all along the march enslaved people leveraged the past to influence the present. They relived past cruelties, disclosed their masters' true sympathies, and snuffed out hidden plantations goods in an effort to bottle-in the throes of emancipation and twist the politics of the moment to their own benefit. Sometimes they did so to curry favor with the soldiers, and other times they did so to enact their own forms of justice, as if to finally give the people who held them in bondage what history had coming for them.¹⁰⁵

But as much as enslaved people used the army as a buffer between them and their masters, threats emerged from the soldiers as well. Foraging was a forceful, mean business, and from the vantage point of the enslaved, the ripping and rooting of valuable goods and supplies looked a lot like pure theft. It also tended to escalate, sometimes rather quickly, and end in either unseemly behavior or acts of abuse. One enslaved woman remembered that when the soldiers arrived, they “took all the best horses” and carted off a wagon-load full of money but not before drinking as much whiskey as they could handle and filling their canteens with what they couldn't. The soldiers then as parting gift apparently refilled the glass bottles with collections of spit before handing them back. Mariah Callaway, from Talbot County, near Macon, remembered first being frightened by the soldiers and then being shocked at how they conducted themselves, likening them to “bandits.” “When the war broke out and the damn Yankees came to our place, they done everything that was bad,” claimed another, a brief but blunt indictment that strikes at an essential reality: when soldiers and enslaved people met, they did so on unstable ground and on plane marked by the war.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ W.P.A. Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Mariah Callaway, Vol. IV, Part I, 175; W.P.A. Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Dink Walton, Vol. IV, Part 4, 208; W.P.A. Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Ferbe Rogers, Vol. IV, Part 3, 216.

In these wild and vexing environments nothing was safe. This was true for white families, but it was also true for enslaved people. It was actually quite common for enslaved people to own various pieces of property like hogs, chickens or even a wagon and horse. Most plantations also allowed enslaved people to grow their own vegetable gardens or keep their own personal provisions grounds tucked away in a corner lot somewhere near the slave quarters. In many cases, access to a garden or a coop of chickens was a way supplementing the meager provisions provided by a slave-owner or overseer and thus often how the enslaved fought off starvation, especially in winter. Property ownership on a larger scale—the owning of livestock, carts, ect.—was particularly prevalent further to the south, nearer the coast, where the slave system’s history of rice production influenced the labor system and created more opportunities for the enslaved to own property. But even in the cotton-growing regions of central Georgia, where there were fewer opportunities, the enslaved still had important possessions of their own—be it food, supplies, personal items like clothes or blankets, or family heirlooms passed down from parents to children.¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, soldiers showed little compunction about simply taking what they wanted. Foragers rifled through slave quarters, ransacked the houses of enslaved men and women, and walked off carrying goods and valuables belonging to the enslaved. “We have soldiers so degraded and low born as to plunder the houses of the blacks of the last mouthful of food and every valuable,” complained a colonel from Ohio. Hitchcock once witnessed the destruction first hand when an enslaved woman came begging for his help, crying “Please, sir, soldiers robbing

¹⁰⁷ See Dylan Pennigroth, “Slavery, Freedom, and Social Claims to Property Among African Americans in Liberty County, Georgia, 1850-1880,” *Journal of American History* 84 (Sept. 1997), 405-435. See also, Phillip D. Morgan, “Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700-1880,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 39. No. 4 (Oct. 1982), 563-599.

me of all I got, clothes and everything.” Sure enough, he found “four or five soldiers” in her cabin “turning things over” and had to order them out. Another enslaved man near Covington who was known for making and saving money, perhaps to buy his freedom or that of his family, had all his “chests broke open, his money and tobacco taken” and all his wife’s clothes stolen. And in Liberty County, on the coast, where the enslaved tended to own a greater amount of property, an enslaved nurse put it this way: “Dey’ve took ebry ting I had,” she told an interviewer, saying “What kin you spec fum a hog but a grunt.”¹⁰⁸

The stories of soldiers entering into slave cabins and stealing enslaved peoples’ property points to a paradox of personal space that played out at stops all along the March. It’s a paradox related to the conundrum enslaved people faced as they thrust their rival geographies into the center of the war, and it rested on a sinister contradiction: Enslaved people may have mobilized their rival geographies in an effort to aid the army and partner with the soldiers, but in so doing, they opened these spaces up to men uninterested in respecting them. In fact, enslaved people often contemplated the political use of such spaces while watching soldiers violate their own personal space and requisition their own personal belongings, a phenomenon that couldn’t have made it easy for the enslaved to invite soldiers in and share their particular knowledge. That the enslaved faced such a knotty conundrum owes itself, on the one hand, to the fact that the force of the March was growing more invasive by the day, with fewer guardrails to speak of. Yet on the other, more important hand, racism within the army’s ranks combined with slavery’s long history of violent expropriation made the plundering of enslaved space too commonplace and too easily

¹⁰⁸ Oscar Jackson, *The Colonel’s Diary: Journals Kept Before and During the War by the Late Colonel Oscar L. Jackson of New Castle, Pennsylvania, Sometime Commander of the 63rd Regiment O.V.I.* (Sharon, Pa, 1922), 192-193; Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 114-115; Dolly Lunt Burge, *A Woman’s Wartime Journal*, 23-24; Frances Thomas Howard, *In and Out of the Lines: An Accurate Account of Incidents During the Occupation of Georgia by Federal Troops, 1864-1865* (New York, 1905), 23-24.

justifiable—which produced real traumas, like the pain one enslaved mother must have felt as she watched soldiers dig up the grave of her deceased son, mistaking a coffin for a box of buried treasure.¹⁰⁹

There was a similar paradox at play whenever the enslaved uncovered hidden goods or ran secretly corralled horses into the insatiable arms of the army. Knowing where these goods had been hidden gave enslaved people a valuable card to play, but the soldiers eventually caught on. Soon, foraging parties on all lines of march developed a new strategy: “Should they [the soldiers] not succeed, after a thorough search through every nook and cranny of the house, and the breaking open of everything under lock and key,” wrote George Sharland, an Illinois soldier, “they then threaten violence to the half-affrighted negroes if they do not make known their place of concealment.” Rice K. Bull, a New Yorker, said as much in fewer words when wrote that “the negroes were used, or I might say forced, to reveal the hiding places” of concealed items. In one instance, John Potter, the man who witnessed Ben and Sally reunite with their long-lost daughter, wrote about once pulling his revolver on a group of enslaved men who balked at helping him haul away a cart of stolen corn. When the threat of the gun didn’t get the enslaved moving fast enough, he then went a step further and threatened to take one of them away, which was soldiers-speak for impressing him into the army.¹¹⁰

Potter’s threat to seize the man exposes another of the March’s darker characteristics. Impressment—the forced seizure of men and women for the purpose of military labor—ran rampant. Amanda Styles, a young girl at the time of the March, remembered seeing her mother

¹⁰⁹ See Noah Andre Trudeau, *Southern Storm: Sherman’s March to the Sea* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 310

¹¹⁰ George Sharland, *Knapsack Notes*, 46; Rice C. Bull and K. Jack Bauer, *Soldiering: The Civil War Diary of Rice C. Bull, 123rd New York Volunteer Infantry*, Berkley ed (New York: Berkley Books, 1988), 181; Rev. John Potter, *Reminiscences of the Civil War in the United States* (Oskaloosa, IA: The Globe Presses, 1897), 108

“carried off” by the soldiers, which was the last time she would ever see her. Another enslaved woman said that when the soldiers arrived, they set fire to the cotton mill and afterwards came into the house, stole all the sweet milk, helped themselves to the smokehouse, and then seized two horses and two enslaved men. Dolly Sumner Lunt, a white woman from Covington, who kept an extensive wartime diary, also wrote that soldiers forced the issue of impressment by flashing their bayonets, which created a moment of delirium. One enslaved man named Newton ran for his cabin; another young boy hid in a crawlspace; another named James hid in the house and was later captured while escaping out through a window; and Jack tried to run but soon found himself staring down the barrel of a gun with a man threatening to shoot him if he refused to come along. In addition to these men, the soldiers seized Mid, another enslaved man, and Bob disappeared in the fracas, never to be heard from again, though Lunt believed the soldiers seized him as well.¹¹¹

Bear in mind that understanding impressment along the March is a tough nut to crack. Mainly, the passivity of the language—enslaved people being “taken off” or “carried away”—sometimes leaves a lot left unclear. That being said, impressment certainly happened, and, even more, the army had a significant interest in seizing enslaved people and incorporating them into army as military laborers—chiefly as pioneers, teamsters, or roadbuilders. Along those same lines, individual soldiers also used impressment as a means of acquiring their own personal valets or porters, and regiments likewise impressed men and women into service because they wanted their own laundresses and cooks. There is also this: to some (not all but some) of the soldiers, the enslaved were seen as just another resource to requisition. The more enslaved

¹¹¹ W.P.A. Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Amanda Styles, Vol. IV, Part 4, 343; W.P.A. Slave Narratives, Georgia Narratives, Lucy McCullough, Vol. IV, Part 3, 68; Burge, *A Woman's Wartime Journal*, 23-24.

people seized, the more damage done to the South; the more enslaved people seized, the weaker the Confederacy became. From this perspective, impressment operated as a function of the foraging process writ large, making it more feature than flaw within the wider workings of the March.¹¹²

Even still, impressment was a symptom of a larger reality: Violence defined the March. It was everywhere and nowhere, real and perceived, and often as soft and subtle as it was sharp. The potential for violence was the baseline fact of the entire campaign, and as baselines go, the simple fact of violence is that it produces death. The March was no exception. Enslaved people died and often by simply being caught in the crossfire. There were reports of startled nighttime pickets firing on enslaved people as they rushed to join the army's camp, and in one instance, Hitchcock recorded walking down a railroad track when a hidden Confederate battery fired off a cannon blast. The ball rattled down the track, ricocheted off the road, and struck an enslaved man in the head, killing him instantly. Another tragic moment happened in Milledgeville right out in the open. A soldier in the ranks shot two enslaved women who were celebrating the army's arrival from a balcony overhanging the street—literally, fired off two shots and killed them both. The man was held in prison for a time, but an investigation reportedly concluded that the shooting was “purely accidental,” which strains belief. Nonetheless, the point remains: Violence hung over the March like those thick wisps of smoke and could come from anywhere at any time.¹¹³

¹¹² See Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 291.

¹¹³ John McBride, *History of the Thirty-Third Indiana Veteran Volunteer Infantry during the four years of civil war, from Sept. 16, 1861, to July 21, 1865; and incidentally of Col. John Coburn's Second Brigade, Third Division, Twentieth Army Corps, including Incidents of the Great Rebellion* (Indianapolis: Wm. Burford, 1900), 163; Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 171; David Floyd, *History of the Seventy-Fifth Regiment of Indiana Infantry Volunteers, Its Organization, Campaigns, and Battles (1861-1865)* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publishing Company, 1893), 351.

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In the opening act of every great drama there are decisive moments where rising tensions meet in a way that propels a story down its destined path. Along the March, there were two such moments. The first was the Battle of Griswoldville, which took place just east of Macon on November 22, about a week into the March. It would be the first and only serious engagement of the entire campaign. In the days leading up to the battle, Georgia Governor Joseph E. Brown and members of the Georgia state legislature launched their final, desperate attempt to stave off Sherman's advance. They passed an emergency conscription bill—a Confederate "Levée en Masse," as they called it— forcing all able-bodied men (excepting themselves, of course) into the Georgia militia in the hopes of rallying for one last defense of the Georgia heartland. It went off like a lead balloon. Not only did the conscription order not reach anyone in time to mount a real defense, all the state could feasibly muster was about three brigades of Georgia militia, which, in truth, was little more than a sad sack of old men and young boys. In any case, the outmanned and ill-trained militia took to arms. They were on their way to Augusta, Sherman's presumed target, but turned back when word of the army's movement got out and made their stand near a stop along the Central Georgia Railroad, a small, speck of a place called Griswoldville.¹¹⁴

It was a fierce fight if only for a moment. The militia charged and charged and then charged again. About twenty-three hundred Georgia militiamen threw themselves up against a single federal brigade, about three thousand troops, but the veterans of Sherman's right wing— experienced men chastened by campaigns for Atlanta and Chattanooga—held firm. They repulsed the attacks for about two hours before finally forcing the rag-tag band of militia

¹¹⁴ See Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 256; Bailey, *War and Ruin*, 70-74.

members into a beating a hasty retreat. The result: about five hundred Confederate casualties to a little less than a hundred federal casualties. Of all the great battles Sherman's men had taken part in, this, it was clear, was certainly not one of them. The sights following the battle told the soldiers all that needed telling. "I was never so affected at the sight of the wounded and dead before," wrote a soldier from Illinois, "Old grey haired and weakly looking men and little boys, not over 15 years old, lay dead or writhing in pain." Theodore Upson, another well-known documenter of the March, called it a "harvest of death," noting how fathers and sons, young and old, all lay dead and mangled together. The bodies told two sides of the same story, reflecting at once the sorry state of the Confederate war effort as well as the irresistible force of Sherman's federal army. The dead were also manifestations of something more material and more important to the soldiers. With the Georgia militia vanquished, the army could now march on to Savannah practically unopposed.¹¹⁵

Meanwhile, on that very same morning, members of Sherman's left wing strode into Milledgeville, Georgia's capitol, which sat only about twenty miles northeast of the fighting at Griswoldville. Hitchcock and the general staff had been warned by the enslaved that Confederate officials planned on putting up a fight, but Georgia Governor Joseph Brown, along with most of the citizens, and what was left of the Georgia legislature all read the writing on the wall. They fled the city just days before the army arrived, which meant that apart from the occasional rock thrown from a second story window, Sherman's men moved in with little opposition and announced their arrival with all the fanfare of a military parade. The soldiers struck up

¹¹⁵H.H. Orendorf, et al. *Reminiscences of the Civil War from the Diaries of the 103rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry* (Chicago: J.F. Learning & Co., 1904),152. Oscar Osborn Winther, ed. *With Sherman to the Sea: The Civil War Diaries and Reminiscences of Theodore F. Upson* (Millwood, NY: Kraus, 1985), pg. 138. See also, Bailey, *War and Ruin*, 70-74.

regimental bands, waved flags, and marched the city from end to end. “The day was cloudless,” remembered one Wisconsin veteran, writing that “the troop came in all closed up, marching in perfect step to the sound of martial music.” Another Illinois soldier remembered that after seeing a white surrender flag flying high above the first house they saw, the men “marched through the city by the music of our bands.” The “Star-Spangled Banner” and “Yankee Doodle” played on throughout the day, and at some point, someone strung up a regimental flag of the United States army high over the roof of the Gothic-style statehouse. Confederate Georgia had officially fallen.¹¹⁶

It wasn't long before crowds of enslaved people came out to meet the army and join in the procession. Though many enslaved people had been forcibly removed during successive evacuations, freed men and women filled the city's streets as the army marched past. “The colored people hailed with demonstrative delight the advent of the Union army,” wrote one soldier, recalling how Black people showered the soldiers with blessings and reached out as if to hug the men whenever the columns marched by. Another noted that there was “general rejoicing” among enslaved people and that in terms of food and forage “all were willing to divide everything with us.” The bottleneck leading into Milledgeville was also the point at which the many of the soldiers first noticed the refugee crisis of Sherman's march beginning to set in. The numbers of freed refugees following the army had been growing steadily by the day, and their number seemed even larger as the refugees swelled into the city, exacerbating the pandemonium

¹¹⁶ Edwin E. Bryant, *History of the Third Regiment of Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865* (Published by the Veteran Association of the Regiment, 1891), 282-283. William Grunert, *History of the One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry* (Winchester, IL: R.B. Dedman, 1866), 128.

breaking out on the streets of Milledgeville. It was a glimpse of things still to come and the crisis that would soon emerge.¹¹⁷

Yet if many other soldiers failed to notice the refugees among their ranks at Milledgeville, it was because they were busy reveling in the fall of Georgia's Confederate government. Sherman wanted the destruction kept at a minimum, but with so many symbols of the Confederacy strewn about, the soldiers couldn't help themselves. Troops broke into the state arsenal where they destroyed an assortment of pikes, knives, and other murder weapons; they requisitioned stacks of now worthless Confederate scrip, burned the railroad depot, and ransacked the state library. Most memorably, a large group of soldiers broke into the statehouse and convened their own special legislative session. Rollicking in laughter, Sherman's men announced themselves as speakers of the house, passed motions, and issued their own ordinances of secession. The special legislative session ended only after someone stood up in the back and yelled "the Yankees are coming," to which the entire body howled in laughter and ran out of the chamber in a state of mock hysteria. Insult had been added to injury, but it was more than fun and games. The fall of Milledgeville represented the political counterpoint to the bloody rout at Griswoldville. Together, the two events toppled some of the last state institutions still standing and thus some of the last vestiges of Confederate Georgia, fulfilling, in a sense, one of Sherman's lasting predictions. "Pierce the shell of the C.S.A.," he reportedly said to Hitchcock, "and it's all hollow inside."¹¹⁸

Except Hitchcock didn't need Sherman or the fall of Georgia's government to tell him that the Confederacy was hollow inside. All the confirmation he needed came a day or so earlier,

¹¹⁷ Bryant, *History of the Third Regiment of Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry*, 283; Grunert, *History of the One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 129.

¹¹⁸ Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 89. See Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 260-261; Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 222-223.

just before he and the staff joined the main body in Milledgeville. It was bitter cold that day—so cold that Sherman intruded into “negro hut” to warm himself by a fire. An enslaved woman whom the staff met there, presumably the cabin’s proprietor, insisted that if the staff went further up the road, they would find a larger, more comfortable dwelling. This more comfortable dwelling turned out to be an abandoned plantation owned by none other than Howell Cobb. A scion of one of the state’s most powerful families, Cobb was a powerful politician. He served as the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives from 1849-1851 and later as governor of Georgia before returning for a second stint in the U.S. House on the eve of the war. In 1860, he resigned his seat in Congress and became a fierce champion of secession. He was a delegate to the first secession convention in Montgomery, one of the principal drafters of the Confederate Constitution, and president of the first provisional Congress of the Confederacy before being commissioned as a colonel in the Confederate army. Sherman rightfully called him “one of the leading rebels in the South”; Hitchcock described him differently, calling Cobb “one of the *head devils*.”¹¹⁹

Head devil, indeed. What Hitchcock, Sherman, and the rest of the staff discovered there appalled them to no end. Cobb had apparently ordered the plantation abandoned only days before. The place was empty, or so Hitchcock and the others all thought. When they went about exploring the place, they discovered that Cobb had left behind forty enslaved women, children and crippled old men. They were starving, poorly clothed, and cold. Their cabins whistled with the wind. The more Hitchcock and others poked around, the more they believed that Cobb had left the men, women, and children there to die. On top of that, they were all terribly frightened of

¹¹⁹ Sherman, *Memoirs of William Sherman*, 185; Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 84.

Sherman and his men. Earlier a gang of Confederate horsemen rode through disguised as federal officers and coaxed them into leaving the plantation, which was a vile trick. When a number of the enslaved people agreed to leave, the horsemen turned on them and nearly flogged them to death. In response, Sherman and the staff ripped the place apart. They ordered food turned over to the enslaved people, and instructed the men to spare nothing. That night they light a huge bonfire and everyone—enslaved people and all—warmed themselves while enjoying what was the left of the Cobb plantation.¹²⁰

Justice though would only be bittersweet. At some point during the stay, Hitchcock learned that this was not *the* Cobb plantation, but instead *one of many* plantations owned by Howell Cobb. According to information gathered on the scene, most likely from the enslaved, Cobb possessed an additional four to five plantations (he actually owned thirteen plantations stretched across multiple counties in Georgia and three states) and enslaved as many as five to six hundred men and women across his varying estates. This one—this six-hundred-acre estate worked by as many as one hundred enslaved people—was just his wife’s place, an inheritance passed on to Cobb by virtue of his marriage. For Hitchcock, this off-hand discovery about the extent of Cobb’s power seemed to place the entire Confederate project into perspective, revealing in the starkest of terms the kind-of moral emptiness in the idea of a slaveholder’s republic. It also reinforced what for Hitchcock had been an ongoing realization. The war, he knew, needed winning, but to really defeat the Confederacy, slavery had to die, two things which were not necessarily commensurate or the same. One simply put down a rebellion; the other cut the rebellion off at its root. One could potentially keep the country at a status-quo; the other remade American society by removing its most malignant tumor. As Hitchcock sat, stared into

¹²⁰ Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 84-85; Nichols, *The Story of the Great March*, 58-59.

the fire, and listened to the stories of the men and women Cobb enslaved, it was a distinction that had never been so clear.¹²¹

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The taking of Milledgeville completed what Hitchcock described as the campaign's "first act." He was perhaps more right than he realized. In leaving Milledgeville and crossing the Oconee River, the army not only crossed the mid-point of the March, it passed over the state's fall line. From this point forward, the landscape slopes softly, flattening out into a sandy plane, and all the rivers flow south, with their many mouths opening into the warm waters of the Atlantic Ocean. The roads here were ruttier, the fields leaner, and plush pastures gave way to murky swamps and dense, low-lying pine barrens. As Georgia's terrain changed, so did the general shape of emancipation. Movement became as important as ever. Faced with a scarce landscape and new impediments to the army's progress, soldiers began turning more enslaved men and women back away from the lines, even as enslaved people continued to leave their plantations and seek refuge within the army. Thus, as the enslaved people became freed people so many more became wartime refugees, people whose pursuit of freedom doubled as a disorienting odyssey at the tail-end of Sherman's army. Not only was there, as of yet, no clear destination or end point, marching along with army meant pursuing freedom in a place where the threats never ceased, clarity never came, freedom was always up ahead, and there were still many, many rivers to cross.

¹²¹ Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 85.

Chapter Three

On the March

On December 9, 1864, the pent-up tensions of the March's growing refugee crisis came to a terrible climax. It happened along the lines of the 14th Army Corps at a crossing of a "bayou or arm" of the Savannah River known as Ebenezer Creek. Practically still and lined with sad,

misshapen cypress trees, Ebenezer Creek was one of the many channels and streams that blocked the road and backed up the March as the army moved toward the coast. Crossing these sometimes quite broad bodies of water required nothing less than repeated feats of military engineering. In double-time and with quick precision, the army's engineers would roll out foldable pontoons, latch them together using pins and rope, and then lay wooden planks over the top, creating temporary bridges sturdy enough to hold up the weight of a moving army. Once everyone and everything—all the men, wagons, horses, pack, and artillery pieces—came across and the bridges weren't needed any longer, the engineering corps would then repeat the process but in reverse. They would tear the bridges down as fast as they put them up and then rush ahead in preparation for the next crossing, where they would start the process once again. And so it went, especially the closer the army came to Savannah and all the rivers flowing out toward the coast.¹²²

Except at Ebenezer Creek calamity struck. Orders came down that the bridge was to be pulled up and dismantled before the large number of freed men and women following the army had a chance to cross. At first, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. A guard stood by at the start of the bridge turning the freed men and women away on the spurious grounds that fighting lay up ahead and the refugees needed to keep to the rear. Then once the army cleared the river, guards and engineers began pulling up the bridge, which roused cries and shouts from the freed men and women stranded on the opposite bank. The cacophony of abandoned voices then suddenly rose once again, this time to a high pitch as shouts turned to shrieks and a sinister betrayal morphed into one of the Civil War's most dreadful massacres. Wheeler's Confederate cavalry had been following close behind, and just as soon as the army crossed, mounted soldiers barreled into the

¹²² William Passmore Carlin, *The Memoirs of the Brigadier General William Passmore Carlin, U.S.A.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 157.

crowd of refugees with sabers raised and guns cocked. Chaos ensued. Shots rang out, screams erupted, and men and women plunged into the cold water of Ebenezer Creek, some with children in hand, where they grasped for anything that might get them to the other side. Some, sadly, never made it. Many drowned. Others never made it into the water to begin with, as those left stranded were either captured and re-enslaved or killed on the spot. Charles D. Kerr, a soldier, who saw it all from opposite bank, described it as “a scene the like of which I pray my eyes may never see again.”¹²³

Many of the soldiers never knew what was happening behind them. Most had already marched on up ahead with the rest of the column and thus never saw the horrific scenes happening at the army’s rear. It was also an incident that occurred on only one of four lines of march, a simple point-of-fact that often reduces the incident to a minor part of a much larger drama. Yet despite often being buried by history, this betrayal at Ebenezer Creek reflected the central tension of the entire March: the enslaved pushed, and the army pulled away. Enslaved men and women ran to the army, followed the army, and placed pressure on the army to recognize emancipation as something more than a wartime necessity. In response, the army wavered. Soldiers let freed men and women follow along when it suited and then turned them back when it didn’t. Emancipation was never more than a policy prescription, and refuge was something that occurred only in bits and pieces, if it occurred at all. Even so, freed people kept moving and kept marching. The freed refugees continued to press the army, knowing deep down that Sherman’s long blue lines were a manifestation of freedom whether the soldiers liked it or knew it or not.

¹²³ Charles D. Kerr, 126th Illinois Cavalry, ‘From Atlanta to Raleigh’ in *Glimpses of the Nation’s Struggle*, Vol. 1 (1887),

This fundamental impasse over emancipation and its meaning shows us why the refugee experience of Sherman's March matters. As refugees, the freed people who followed the army faced an inordinate number of hardships. Think about it: The marching, mile after mile, likely with no shoes in a crisp Georgia winter, the constant threat of sweeping Confederate cavalry attacks, the lack of any sort of legal protections or rights to asylum, and the basic challenge of keeping a family together—it all made for a daunting journey. Yet by virtue of their status and the pains that came with it, the freed people at the end of those lines carried a clear message that challenged what even well-meaning soldiers like Hitchcock had come to believe. Yes, slavery had to die, but that was never the end of the equation. Freedom had to matter. It had to mean something, and it had to mean something more than a mere exemption from slavery. Most soldiers never understood this. They were either too prejudiced, too fixated on ending the war, or too caught up in the moment to see beyond their own noses and recognize what it really meant to end slavery. But the refugees certainly did, and by pressing the army as refugees, they forced Sherman's army—and by extension, the entire country—into grappling with what freedom really meant.

Expectations, however, need tempering. Triumphalism tends to defy reality and give the lie to history. This ongoing effort on the part of the Georgia refugees to give freedom greater definition by following the army is no exception. The individual motives inducing people to either stay or leave was never clear cut as it might seem. Nor, unfortunately, was this movement ever all that successful. The army may have been a manifestation of freedom, but the army also closed as many doors as it opened; and as the tragedy at Ebenezer Creek makes all too painfully clear, the violence never ceased. If anything, the violence of Sherman's March became even more pervasive while the army was on the move. Not only would the columns eventually

encounter a changed landscape where pickings were slim and new obstacles abounded, the freed refugees who followed the army were miles from home and completely untethered from any stable system of support, which made them that much more vulnerable. Nothing, in other words, was easy and nothing was certain. The Georgia refugees made a powerful statement by leaving the plantations and following the army, but it was a statement that ran up against the cruel realities of war and thus landed on American society in all the discordant tones of a burgeoning crisis.

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The movement toward the army began early in the March. At first, it was only individuals—a lone man or woman coming to meet the army—mostly because the regions right around Atlanta had all been evacuated. Those that met the army in those early days were therefore likely those who managed to escape the caravans of fleeing white Georgians heading for points further south. But as the army moved into middle Georgia enslaved people began arriving at the army's lines in larger numbers and in greater frequency. All along the road and on plantations the army passed men and women pulled up stakes and did their best to join the federal army—if not as laborers, cooks, or valets, then as refugees marching along at the rear. At one plantation near Shady Dale, a large estate home to about two-hundred and fifty enslaved people, Hitchcock tells us that the enslaved refused to evacuate and instead “joined the Yankees in high glee.” “So it is everywhere,” he wrote, realizing he was witnessing the start of a larger phenomenon.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 78.

And a phenomenon it most certainly was. “Negroes by the hundred are coming into our line and we are keeping them with us,” wrote an Indiana soldier, explaining that the freed men were able foragers and “not bad fellows to have along.” “They [the enslaved] were overjoyed at the coming of our army,” wrote another Ohio soldier, describing a time near Madison in which “hundreds from this one neighborhood seized the opportunity to escape to freedom.” In another case, a different Ohio soldier reported that “About a hundred negroes came in...each bringing a good horse and mule.” And so it was all across the upper reaches of middle Georgia. Enslaved men and women were meeting and joining the army in large numbers—groups, according to the soldiers, as large as a hundred at a time. For the soldiers, many of whom had never seen slavery or experienced the war in such it way, seeing enslaved men and women flee to the army like this made for a dumbfounding experience. One Indiana soldier perhaps captured the experience best when he simply wrote, astonished, that “men, women, and children poured in from every direction.”¹²⁵

It wasn’t necessarily the numbers, however, that shocked and astounded the soldiers. Rather, it was more the resolute way the enslaved men and women came to the army. They came on foot, of course, but they also came on top of horses and mules, in carriages, and in the backs of wagons, with bags packed, food stored away, and in their best clothes. “Whole families are frequently seen coming in on the crossroads, with some old mule team and wagon, having on board what few household items they could get together,” wrote George S. Bradley, the Wisconsin chaplain, noting how the wagons lined the roadways waiting to fall in. “Some [rode] in buggies of the most costly and glittery manufacture; some on horseback,” is how another

¹²⁵ James G. Essington Diary, Indiana State Library, quoted in Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 146; Samuel H. Hurst, *Journal-History of the Seventy-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry* (Chillicothe, Ohio), 155; Charles Smith, *A View within the Ranks*, quoted in Trudeau, pg. 124; McBride, *History of the Thirty-Third Indiana Veteran Volunteer Infantry*, 152.

soldier remembered it. The resounding message was that the freed men and women were in it for the long-haul, wherever the March may take them. One woman who marched along the stampede of livestock and rolling wagons, child in her arms, said as much when she responded to an officer's taunts. "Where are you going, Aunty?" he asked, invoking a common racial epithet. With a "beseeching" look, she said, "I'm going where you're going," as if the question needn't have been asked.¹²⁶

The decision wasn't easy. Whether to follow the army or stay behind was a decision that came with countless considerations. First and foremost was the basic weighing of risk versus reward, of measuring what could be gained against what could be lost. Then came the practicalities: Freed people had to consider their overall health and ability to make the March. Did they have access to a horse or buggy to ease the burden? Did they have enough food? They had to think about family and community. Would they go alone or in a larger group? Did following the army mean leaving a parent, sibling, or loved one behind? And, ironically, they had to think about white slaveholders and consider the prospect of some future retribution for leaving. What might happen, for instance, if one had to return to a home plantation? Would they be banished or beaten—or worse, kept from seeing those they loved? Finally, leaving meant wrestling with a set of greater unknowns like where exactly they would follow the army to and what life would look like when they got there. For thousands of freed people in Georgia these were questions worth trying to answer, even at such great risk, but for so many more, either the potential toll was just far too great or circumstances just wouldn't allow it, making it best to stay behind.

¹²⁶ Bradley, *Star Corps*, 195; J.R. Kinnear, *History of the Eighty-Sixth Regiment, Illinois Volunteer Infantry* (Chicago: Tribune Company, 1866), 81; Thomas M. Stevenson, *History of the 78th Regiment O.V.V.I., From its "Muster-in" to its "Muster-Out"* (Zanesville, OH: H. Dunne), 314.

Moreover, if making the decision was hard, actually following through and leaving could be just as difficult. On the one hand, the army was never that compliant. Even if a freed person weighed out all the risk, took all the necessary steps, and struck out with bags packed ready to march, an unsympathetic soldier could always try and turn them back, an outcome that sometimes spiraled into threats or shows of force. On the other, plantation attachments did not just melt away. Leaving meant tearful goodbyes to family, friends, community, even a sense of place. It meant innumerable moments like the one shared by a freed man named Nat and all his peers, who, when saying goodbye, broke out in tears, as one soldier remembered. Conversely, leaving also meant saying goodbye to—or *clawing away from*—a white master or mistress, something one Illinois private witnessed once while stopped near Madison. After a freed couple announced their decision to leave, the soldier wrote that their white now former master did his best to keep them from leaving. He tried playing up his paternal benevolence, he tried guilt, he played the woe-is-me card. Nothing worked. In tears but unwavering, the couple still left. “We must go,” the man said before leaving, telling his former master bluntly, “freedom is as sweet to us as it is to you.”¹²⁷

Leaving, in other words, was complicated, and it required navigating the social world of the plantation—of saying goodbye to peers and parsing one’s way through a master-slave relationship burdened by prior history. Add in the not-so encouraging hand of the federal army and leaving could sometimes also mean getting caught in a tangled web of interpersonal interactions, some of which proved too thorny and complex to escape. Unfortunately, this is what happened to Louisa, the enslaved woman whom Hitchcock spoke with at the plantation of John

¹²⁷ Nelson Stauffer, *Civil War Diary* (Northridge, CA: California State University-Northridge Libraries, 1976). See entry for Nov. 15 1864; Robert Hale Strong, *A Yankee Private’s Civil War*, ed. Ashley Halsey (Chicago: Henry Regnery Corp., 1961) 113-114.

B. Jones. Louisa made it clear to Hitchcock that she wanted to leave with the army, but Hitchcock discouraged her. He said they didn't want women following them, that the marching would be too strenuous, and he repeated the often-told lie that the soldiers would soon return. In response, Louisa said again that she would "like mightily to go wid you now," but then let slip that she felt some responsibility for Jones's children, who had been left with a sick mother. It was all the opening Hitchcock needed. "Don't leave 'em—stay where you are," he commanded, before hectoring on about how freedom didn't mean a freedom from work. "Two words of encouragement would have brought her along," he later acknowledged, but those two words never came. Instead, he turned Louisa away and did so by exploiting her perceived obligations to the Jones children.¹²⁸

Louisa's example is a case in point for why those who stayed behind shouldn't be forgotten or written out of the story. Her voice—her practically asking Hitchcock to go along—reveals that while leaving carried a message, it was a message that only told half the story and only features half of those who made it. The other half are forgotten voices like Louisa as well as a group of five or six "older negro men" who Sherman, Hitchcock, and general's staff met just hours after Hitchcock discouraged Louisa from joining the March. Their spokesman was a man who Hitchcock described as being "really dignified" and about fifty years old. He spoke with Sherman and staff for a nearly an hour and explained all the reasons the men weren't going to follow the army, saying, that "with the age of them all, and the rheumatics of this one, and the lameness of that one, and the families they all must leave, it was really better for them to stay where they were." Sherman agreed, perhaps with a wry smile because it was exactly the outcome he wanted. Nonetheless, the men had a larger point to make. They likely knew what Sherman

¹²⁸ Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 126-127.

would say, but they held their court and made their point anyway, implying with all the decorum of a diplomatic colloquy that they *would go* if not for their various impediments. Why would the men go to such trouble? Because leaving did indeed make a statement about freedom. But it wasn't the only way to make a statement, and the men made sure Sherman and the staff knew exactly where they stood.¹²⁹

Still, statement or no statement, Sherman probably wasn't moved all that much. As the commanding general, he had one express goal, and it was to make sure that his army faced as few impediments as possible, which, to him, meant keeping as many freed people away from his lines as he could. Hence, his response: He told the men they were "perfectly right," that they "ought to stay," and that the army only permitted the "able-bodied, who wished it," to go along, which in Sherman-speak were freed men who were willing and able to work. The exchange fit a familiar pattern. According to Hitchcock, Sherman always spoke to freed men and women in a frank, disarming style and always heard them out— if for no other reason than because critical intelligence could always come up in conversation and he knew that having the support of the enslaved was a boon to his men. But he held firm when it came to those wanting to join the March. He often repeated the same white lie that Hitchcock told—that the army would someday return—and he always hoped that those he spoke with would go on to discourage others, spreading through word of mouth his own clear message to stay behind and not overburden his army.¹³⁰

The soldiers were a different story. Though many shared Sherman's apprehensions and many of his subordinates followed his command, others, especially the common foot soldier,

¹²⁹ Ibid. 127-128.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

never toed the same line. So long as things were good—that is, so long as the men lived high on the hog trawling the breadbasket of north-central Georgia while facing few impediments—freed men and women amassing at the end of their lines was of no consequence to them. As a result, soldiers would sometimes invite freed men and women to come along or enlist (or impress) a freed person as either a valet, cook, or washerwoman. Others simply looked the other way. In their minds, it was all part of the romp—a mere function of being wrapped up in the fever of foraging and moving with wave like force through the state of Georgia. Things would soon change. The closer the army came to Savannah and the longer the line of refugees extended behind the army grew, making it harder for the men to cross rivers and find adequate food, the more soldiers caught on to Sherman’s message and began turning freed people away. But even then, there was no hard and fast rule, and there was no unifying army-wide consensus outside Sherman’s original refugee policy, which wasn’t worth much more than the paper it was written on.

This dissonance between policy and practice, between Sherman’s aims and what actually happened, created even more space for freed people to press into the army’s lines. So the freed men and women kept at it. They kept leaving plantations and following the army, and they came in such large numbers that by the time the army reached Milledgeville, the full scope of the growing crisis began to set in. “There was a great caravan of negroes hanging on the rear of our column when it arrived in Milledgeville,” wrote one Illinois soldier before likening the refugees to a cloud attached to a “thunderstorm or tornado.” “The negroes continued to flock to the army,” claimed another. “Some of them were utilized as servants, but the great mass was becoming an alarming incubus,” the soldier went on to write, conceding that “threats did not deter them” and “their number increased with each succeeding day.” These were the words of someone sounding

the alarm, of someone awakening to the “anxiety occasioned” by the presence of that many refugees joining the army. The man alluded specifically to the problems of supply—of making sure everyone had enough food—but the soldier’s comments evoked a deeper anxiety starting to spread throughout the soldiery: The March was no longer only theirs, and they no longer had complete control.¹³¹

That, in a sense, was the bottom line of the entire campaign. Sherman built the March and orchestrated the army’s movements, but he couldn’t control it. No one could. The collective force of an army that size moving at that speed made the whole thing impossible to police or contain. Such is why at some point the March ceased being a cut and dry military campaign and took on all the airs of a social convulsion: It was chaotic, untamed, and people moved. Soldiers swept through the state bringing all the tumult of a bloody civil war, and in response, freed men and women mirrored the army’s movements, turning middle Georgia into a crisscrossed landscape marked by a massive wave of humanity. But focusing only on the movement and the large, looming dust clouds arising from the March misses what the movement meant. Socially, the state was coming undone. White families either fled, creating a vacuum of power, or watched as slavery disintegrated and their worlds fell apart. Soldiers, meanwhile, marched from one plantation to the next, stomping out the last embers of a dying Confederacy, and freed people responded accordingly. Their worlds were changing as well, and they moved so as to finish the work already underway—which is to say that if America has ever had a moment of real social revolution, this was surely it.¹³²

¹³¹ Kinnear, *History of the Eighty-Sixth Regiment, Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 81; McBride, *History of the Thirty-Third Indiana Veteran Volunteer Infantry*, 154.

Ironically, as wild and disorienting as revolutionary convulsions can be, they can also be strangely, almost quietly clarifying. The March had this same kind of quality. Amid all the threats and shouts, between all the fear and uncertainty, as if standing in the eye of storm, freed men and women held a focused, clear-sighted view of what freedom meant to them. Certainly, what they understood as freedom was never what the soldiers immediately recognized as freedom, and, moreover, their vision of freedom centered on things we might take for granted today. Yet in their actions and in the many reasons they gave for either making or not making the March, freed people couldn't have been more adamant that these were real freedoms nonetheless. And as freedoms go, the freedoms freed people pursued were the kind of baseline freedoms that all others could be built upon and the kind of things larger, book-reading notions of freedom often overlook. Simply stated, these were the kind of freedoms that if they didn't matter, nothing else did.

Freedom, in short, was a thing like family. It was Ben and Sally escaping to Atlanta and then making the March with the hopes that by some fate of chance they might reconnect with their long-lost daughter. It was the woman who begged the soldiers to let her follow them to Savannah so that she could find her husband and children, whom she had been sold away from many years ago. And it was the woman who, a soldier wrote, had been "gone with grief going on four years" after seeing her son sold away and aimed to follow the army to Macon so that she might see him again. Family, these stories show, were a part of how freed people imagined freedom, and the circumstances of the March were such that reunions like these now suddenly seemed possible. Freed people knew, for instance, that the March meant movement. As a traveling caravan, it had the potential to take them toward the places they longed to see and the people they missed. Alternatively, if that didn't seem plausible, they knew that at the very least

the March itself was a kind of a magnet that drew people in and funneled them all toward the same destination, which made even the most improbable reunions a little more likely. The odds were never great. A lot was up to luck. But because of the March a window had suddenly opened.¹³³

Family was one way that freed people defined freedom, but it was neither the only way nor necessarily the most important. In fact, these efforts to locate lost loved ones rested on another, even more basic freedom that tended to unlock all the rest: the basic freedom to move. If slavery rested on a “geography of containment,” movement was thus a natural building block of whatever freedom was. Freed people knew this and made it the overwhelming message of the March. Not for nothing, after all, did thousands of freed men and women leave their homes on foot, on horseback, and in wagons and travel—as refugees, no less—at the end of Sherman’s long blue lines. Indeed, if the basic fact of the March gave life to any idea, it was the idea that freedom was found in motion: to migrate and determine one’s way in the world, to reconnect with people or a place, and as important, to *feel* free, to feel as if no longer constrained (mentally or physically) by either a master, a plantation, or the sheer weight of slavery’s past. In that sense, following the army was more than a strategic decision and about way more than simply leaving a plantation: It was itself an expression of freedom and a walking embodiment of what emancipation meant.¹³⁴

Generally speaking, this, too, was something that the soldiers rarely understood. Mocking the refugees for how they moved was a favored pastime. The soldiers laughed at the way

¹³³ Potter, *Reminiscences of the Civil War in the United States*, 109-111; T. W. Connelly, *History of the Seventieth Ohio Regiment: from its Organization to its Mustering Out* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Peake Bros, 1902), 133.

¹³⁴ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 6-7. On feel of freedom, see Camp, 118. See also, Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (Vintage: New York, 1980), 292.

refugees ran to the army, with bundles packed, dressed to their best, and with carts or livestock likely taken from their masters. They taunted freed men and women over the idea that the March was for them and that the army had any interest in freeing them, much less letting them follow along. And they especially howled at the freed people's presumed naivety over where they were going and what it all meant. In one instance, James Austin Connelly, an Indiana private and an otherwise sympathetic diarist, reflected on the refugees in a way that put it all into perspective. He wrote that whenever the army passed by a plantation freed men and women generally "pack up their bundles and march along, going, they not know wither, but apparently satisfied they are going somewhere toward freedom." The punchline was that in his mind most "or a majority of them, don't know what freedom is." "Ask any of them where they are going," he went on, laughing as he wrote, "and the almost invariable reply is: 'Don't know Massa; gwine along wid you all.'" ¹³⁵

Connelly clearly saw the refugee experience as the butt of a running joke. What he did not see so clearly was that the joke was actually on him. Freed people knew exactly where they were going and said what they meant. They recognized that in this particular moment freedom was precisely as Connelly described. Not only was it grounded in a freedom of movement, it was relational. It depended on a proximity to the army and hinged on their ability to press into military lines and build relationships with the soldiers. Scholars sometimes see this attachment to the army as form of "social citizenship" in action—the idea that individuals build citizenship from the ground up by placing demands on a state or state institution—and maybe it was, but it really boiled down to the fact that following the army provided a basic sense of protection. So long as freed people moved with the army, its power was within reach and, hopefully, amenable

¹³⁵ Paul M. Angle, ed. *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland: The Letters and Diary of James Austin Connelly* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1959), 311.

to their interests, which, in theory, provided an overarching safeguard that protected them as they moved. It didn't always work out that way. The army failed freed people time and again. But following the army was generally seen as a step toward security, one of most fundamental freedoms of all.¹³⁶

Listening to the refugees tells us that freedom could also mean a host of other things, too. For example, one of the details that slipped out of all disparaging reports of how freed people sought to join the army's lines was in addition to coming with bundles and wagons, women often came wearing dresses requisitioned from their mistresses. The implication: freedom was *femininity*. It was announcing one's womanhood and assuming all the dignity that one's gender deserved. Freedom could also be bound up in a thing like land. Owning land was much more than owning a homestead. It was owning independence. With land, one could work when one wanted, how one wanted, and toward whatever means one wanted, which meant no more overseer and no more settling up at the end of the day. Most of all, land meant no longer being dependent on anyone for patronage or permission, which is all the more reason that a right to the land became such a central concern once the army arrived on the coast. Another key idea was the idea of Jubilee. Strange as it may seem, this old idea was a pivotal part of how freed people imagined freedom because when reduced to its core the idea promised one of the basic building blocks of life outside of slavery: the freedom to start fresh and start anew. It doesn't sound like much, but for a people long enslaved, this fresh start was as foundational to freedom as perpetuity was to slavery.

These varying iterations of freedom, however basic and fundamental, all matter because they help paint a new picture of what the March truly was. Traditionally, we've only ever seen as

¹³⁶ See Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (Vintage: New York, 2016).

far as the fire and guns—meaning we’ve only ever seen the March as a military campaign. What we’ve missed in return is that Sherman’s army cut a path through the state of Georgia wide enough for freed people to begin putting the constitutive pieces of freedom together. They found freedom in movement, sought out lost family members, and asserted claims to bedrock notions of security and independence. The freed men and women of Georgia thus tell us something about the nature of freedom and what it meant to those navigating the throes of emancipation: it’s that freedom was never this or that or any one thing. Rather, freedom was plural. It was an “open-ended process,” as historian Eric Foner writes, of attaining the things slavery had long denied them and of transforming the structures that had kept slavery in-tact. To put the campaign in this context and to focus on the meaning behind all the movement is to finally put the March in its proper place—as one of the most active and robust re-imaginings of freedom in American history.¹³⁷

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Late November is right around hog killing time in Georgia. The days are temperate and mild, but the nights are cool and crisp—just cold enough to keep a split pig from spoiling before turning to ham. Late November is also the tail end of hurricane season, which means that depending on the year bands of rain can run across the state, bringing bouts of wet weather. 1864 must have been one of those years. By the end of the month, with the army now bowing down toward the coast, the soldiers complained bitterly of rain. “It rains incessantly,” wrote an Illinois soldier from east of Macon. “A storm sets in and we get wet as rats,” he wrote again a day later.

¹³⁷ Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019), 184.

“Mud in places knee-deep; wagons getting mired every few moments,” diarized another, noting that the “tramp, tramp of so many feet make deep ruts in the roadside.” “Dismal sky and steady rain” is how Hitchcock put it as the general’s staff plowed through layers of thick red clay, with ruts he tells us in places “fully 18 to 24 inches deep.” “It was bad enough riding through it on a good horse,” he wrote, questioning how anyone made it “marching afoot, or driving heavy teams.”¹³⁸

Cold, wet, and miserable as it might have been, the soldiers all had shoes. They had socks. They had tents, they had blankets, and they had thick military jackets. Moreover, their bellies were full. They ate their weight in hot hams, coal-cooked sweet potatoes, and roasted corn. And when the days forage just wouldn’t do, they had plenty of coffee and cigars—two things that keep bones warm and bodies moving. Some even had freed people doing all their washing and cooking, which meant that clean clothes and fresh meals were always on the ready whenever the army slowed and the weather broke. The freed people who marched behind Sherman’s lines had few, if any, of these comforts. True, some of the refugees traveled in carriages and on top of wagons with wardrobes packed and food stored away on board, but those select few were always in the minority. Most simply marched along on foot—likely shoeless, hungry, and with nothing to stem the cold but the clothes on their backs. And yet, their numbers only grew. Freed men and women continued to follow the army, trudging through the mud and the mire just to join the ranks.

What did it mean for the army to move as it did? Start with the basics. The army rose at dawn and was down at dusk. Fifteen miles—that was the daily average in miles marched, which

¹³⁸ Mary Ann Andersen, ed. *The Civil War Diary of Allen Morgan Greer, Twentieth Regiment, Illinois Volunteers* (Tappan, NY: Appleman, 1977), 177; Charles F. Hubert, *The History of the Fiftieth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry in the War for the Union* (Kansas City, MO: Western Veterans Publishing Company, 1894), 324. Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*, 80-81.

meant that on most days the columns moved all day. It stopped only in spells—long enough, maybe, to repair a road or remove an obstruction blocking the way. Otherwise, the men kept marching and the wheels kept rolling. The foragers kept at it, too. The foraging parties rose early in the morning, trekked off into the Georgia countryside during the day, and then met the army late in the evening, often by lining the roads with wagons loaded, sacks full, and arms overflowing with whatever harvest the men had found. For his part, Sherman and his staff rode with a troop of cavalry as an escort, traveling first with Slocum's left wing, which took them through Covington and Milledgeville, before transferring over to Howard's right-wing round about Millen, just as the approach to Savannah drew near and the Ogeechee River came within sight.

Now, with the basics done and settled, consider the senses and think what it must have been like for the refugees to take it all in. First of all, it was loud: men barked out orders, horses brayed, and wagons rattled, all while a steady thud of marching soldiers and heavy hooves pounded the roadways. It smelled. As if the stench of sixty thousand sweaty, unbathed men wasn't putrid enough, ambulances reeked of spoiled flesh, the sour, nose-turning smells of soiled cloth dampened knapsacks, and the permeating smell of ash and soot probably filled the air. The sights emanating from the lines could also shock and appall. Wagons rumbled along, sometimes at breakneck speeds, fires burned in the distance, amputated limbs filled medical wagons, corpses lay on roadsides, animal carcasses, mostly of pigs and cows, trailed the army like smoke from of a tailpipe, and white men everywhere had guns. Combined, all these things waged a separate and severe war on the senses that must have been a struggle to deal with in every sense of the phrase.

Another thing to remember about armies is that, like bodies, they have a certain anatomy. Though they disguise themselves as one homogenous unit, the reality is that varying parts and pieces make up the whole. Sherman's army was little different. Each of his four-corps had about fifteen thousand troops, and each of those corps had a legion of auxiliary support. There was the medical staff, with their ambulances and medical carts; there was the quartermaster corps, the unit in charge of provisioning all the men; there were also artillery brigades, with their heavy guns and wheeled carts full of cannon balls and other forms shot and shell; and signal corps, which had to travel with flags and telegraph material on hand. Over and above all that, each regiment within the four main infantry corps traveled with mess wagons, supplies, and their own set of pack-animals, typically horses or mules. It was likely that teams of journalists or war-photographers embedded within their ranks, and each regiment had their own band, which meant that the drums and the horns had to come along, too. And even on top of that, all the livestock foraged from the farms of central Georgia had to go somewhere and that somewhere was usually right up alongside or behind the men, turning the March into something like one long cattle drove.¹³⁹

Despite the ill-fitting nature of some of these component parts, each piece of Sherman's army had a proper place that supported the whole, allowing the body to move. It all started with the supply trains, the kind-of circulatory system of the entire campaign. As a testament to how central the supply trains were to inner workings of the army, the soldiers actually deferred much of the road to the wagons that supported them. The infantry aligned themselves to one side, ordering themselves in slender columns, while the wagons took up the rest. The idea was that by

¹³⁹ *The Story of the Fifty-Fifth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, 1861-1865* (Clinton, Mass: W.J. Coulter, 1887), 389-391.

flanking all the supplies the soldiers could defend the wagons against stray cavalry attacks. Plus, traveling in formation like this had the added benefit of keeping the lines tight instead of extending sections of the army out into parts unknown. The result was effectively three separate lines—one of marching soldiers, one of rolling wagons, and then a third of ranging livestock, which the soldiers herded together on the opposite side of the wagons as another buffer shielding the supplies from attack. The refugees, meanwhile, carved out a space for themselves somewhere toward the rear, where they had company in the form of delinquent wagons and straggling soldiers.¹⁴⁰

Yet to only look for freed people at the end of the army's lines is to miss one of the underlying realities of Sherman's march: freed people could be found throughout the army and played a vital part in the day-to-day operations of the campaign. As has already been pointed out, countless numbers of freed men and women served in the army as cooks, laundresses, valets, and teamsters. In these roles they put up tents, stoked fires, and stirred boiling vats of lousy clothes. They also prepared all the horses, and while the soldiers foraged their food, ham doesn't cook on its own and corn won't shuck itself, which meant that the gargantuan task of keeping the army fed fell mostly to freed cooks. Many of these men and women had been like Ben and Sally and had joined the army from as far back in Atlanta; many others may have joined somewhere along the way. Some may have even been impressed into service. In any such case, these men and women never *followed* the army—that is, they were never peripheral to the main column. On the contrary, they *were* the main column. They marched right along and did the work that got the army where it needed going.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

One prime example that proves the point is the army's pioneer corps. The pioneers were a subsection of the engineering corps, except the pioneers did all the grunt work that turned design into action—menial duties like digging trenches, constructing earthworks, or felling trees. Along the March, hundreds of freed men either joined the army as pioneers or were impressed into service by soldiers who couldn't stomach doing the work themselves. One soldier estimated that for every one hundred soldiers serving in the pioneer corps, there were at least seventy freed men serving in the same capacity, and Sherman's goal was to increase that number so that fewer white soldiers had to moonlight as common spades. In fact, in his official campaign orders, Sherman ordered each of his corps to organize a pioneer battalion "composed, if possible, of negroes," and he charged them with the important task of serving as the army's chief road builders. They were to follow the advance guard and fill-in ruts, repair broken embankments, and clear obstructions so that the army could continue at its rapid pace. Imagine, then, what the March must have looked like as out in front scores of freed pioneers quite literally paved the army's path to Savannah.¹⁴¹

The work that the pioneers did at the head of the army was something the army expected to extract from freed people in exchange for access to the army's lines. The capacity to work was thus often the factor that distinguished those who marched with the army from those who marched at the rear among the growing crowd of refugees. Yet work didn't apply equally to everyone. Men had opportunities where women didn't, mostly because Sherman held firm. He stipulated that only the "able-bodied" and those "of service to the several columns" could join the army, which, of course, was his chosen euphemism for men of working age. He didn't want anyone who couldn't serve as surplus laborers to come along, and he especially didn't want any

¹⁴¹ Wright, *A History of the Sixth Iowa*, 363. See William T. Sherman, *Special Field Orders No. 120*, Kingston, Georgia, Nov. 9.

potential impediments milling about his lines. As a result, a wide gender divide opened up in which men gained access to the army as common laborers while a disproportionate number of women were either turned back or forced to the rear. Ultimately, this distinction between those who had their labor recognized and those deemed unfit to work was of enormous consequence because it meant that freed women likely made up the majority of the refugees that marched at the end of the army.¹⁴²

It's true. Freed women predominated the ranks of refugees along with children and to a lesser extent the elderly. So far as the army saw them, women, children, and the aged were all dependents—people who could neither work nor fend for themselves and were thus not worth the potential hassle of bringing into the ranks. For the freed women especially, this was a devastating distinction. Let's not pretend that the freed men who worked for the army had a rosy experience. The days were long, the labor was debilitating, and the army regarded them more like slaves than the freed men they were. Still, as military laborers, the men marched with the army and had the protection that came with it. They also received rations, tents, and even a wage, though payment was more on a promissory basis than a regular paycheck. Freed women received none of these things. They were completely cut-off. All they could expect from the army was dust and deep ruts, which made the particular experience of freed women a large part of the refugee experience as a whole.

This distinction based on labor was also devastating in the sense that it had the potential to separate freed families. Think of it this way: As toilsome and mean as the work was, many freed men likely relished the opportunity to work for the army—not only for the reasons outlined above, but because military service was a mark of distinction. In a world where slavery was

¹⁴² Ibid.

crumbling and enslaved people were imagining lives outside of slavery, shoveling dirt for Sherman's army was an opportunity to press claims for inclusion and prove one's worth as a deserving member of the new America that would emerge from the war. So some men might have felt duty-bound or drawn to working for the army on their own accord. Of course, many of these men were likely impressed and thus forced into service, which makes this a moot point. But the bottom line is that because the army refused to provide refuge and shirked responsibility for those it deemed dependent, freed families faced the prospect of separating. For some, it was choice born from the particularities of the moment; for others, it was a fate foisted upon them through a force of arms. Nonetheless, the result was the same. Families frayed along the road. Husbands left wives, and sons left mothers, leaving freed women pick up the pieces and keep marching.

Picking up the pieces looked a lot like doing what freed women had always done. The women were mothers and providers, and for as much as Sherman and the army discounted the labor of freedom women, it was their labor as caregivers that kept families together while on the March. Up and down the lines soldiers routinely commented on how freed women came to the army leading lines of children, often with each child carrying their own bundles and with the older children caring for the youngest. This was the scene described by one Illinois soldier who witnessed a freed woman marching with her family. It was late in November as the days got colder and colder; the woman balanced a bundle of belongings on her head while her two hands clasped behind her so that she could hold on to the small child that clung to her back. "Following her," the soldier wrote, "was a young girl perhaps twelve years old," and she, too, carried a child her arms. They were "all most wretchedly clothed," with their dresses "patched and re-patched," as if "they had worn no others for years." Yet the woman wore what the soldier described as a

“disconsolate but determined look, and pressed on perseveringly” toward Savannah with the rest of the army.¹⁴³

George S. Bradley, the diarist and Chaplain who marched with the 13th Wisconsin, recalled seeing the same. “Women came with large bundles on their heads, children also carried large packages on their heads, and some of the larger ones carried the little ones,” he wrote, remembering a stop near Milledgeville. Only a day or so later he witnessed another instance in which a family of refugees rode past him. Two small children sat on top “a poor old horse,” he tells us, with “the mother leading it, the father up ahead.” “And here comes another woman on horseback,” he scribbled down in the same breath and on the next line, “with a little boy riding behind her and a small child in her arms.” The woman had apparently been with the army from as far back as Marietta and rode along at the rear while her husband served in the main body as a military teamster. In another instance, Samuel Storrow, one of the rare New Englanders in Sherman’s army, recalled watching two women march along with as many as twenty-one children all under the age of twelve, a sight which he suggests wasn’t all that uncommon. “How they [freed women] managed to keep up with us I can’t imagine,” he wrote, conceding, “but they did, somehow or other.”¹⁴⁴

Scenes like these place freed women at the heart of our story. Their experience shaped a message about the March, and even more important, it was message that the soldiers clearly recognized. Sherman’s men knew that the freed women were “all bent on having their freedom,” as Bradley, the Chaplain, put it. An Illinois diarist even suggested that the “slave women appear

¹⁴³ Fleharty, *Our Regiment*, 119.

¹⁴⁴ Bradley, *Star Corps*, 196, 200-201; Samuel Storrow, Letter to his Mother, *Samuel Storrow Papers*, Civil War Correspondence, Diaries, and Journals at Massachusetts Historical Society. Call No. P-376.

more anxious to be free than the men.” The man reasoned his way to such a conclusion because, in his words, “many a slave mother has carried her little child in her arms, endured hunger and hardships of the march, to be free.” Another soldier came to a similar conclusion when he expressed dismay at the fact that he couldn’t convince the freed women to stay behind. “They will see hard times with the army,” he lamented, “But liberty is sweet, and they seem to think that it is now or never; so they are falling in with the army by the hundreds.” What these comments suggest is it was freed women who spoke the loudest to the soldiers and delivered the most important message of the March—that the campaign was not just an assault on Savannah but a march toward freedom and that freed people would get there one way or the other.¹⁴⁵

And yet, despite this message being sent and delivered, the soldiers still turned freed women away. Freed women came to the lines, and the soldiers ordered them back—to their plantations or to the end of the line, it didn’t matter. All that mattered was that they got out of the army’s way, which turned forcing freed women away into a daily routine. “The most pathetic scenes occur up-on (sic) our line of march daily and hourly” wrote George Ward Nichols, Sherman’s aide. “Thousands of negro women join the column, some carrying household goods, and many of them carrying children in their arms, while older boys and girls plod by their side,” he went on, admitting that “Most all of these women and children are ordered back.” Another soldier, an Indiana man, wrote that most of the refugees “expected to be taken along to freedom” and expressed a “deep disappointment when told that... only such young hearty men that could be made serviceable would be allowed to follow the army.” “Day after day he [Sherman] had to explain to them that he could not have his march delayed,” the man claimed, assuaging himself

¹⁴⁵ Bradley, *Star Corps*, 196; Edwin Payne, *History of the Thirty-Fourth Regiment of Illinois Volunteer Infantry* (Clinton, IA: Allen Printing Co., 1903), 177; Hight, *History of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment of the Indiana Volunteer Infantry* (Princeton: Press of the Clarion, 1895).

that there some reason or rationale for what he had otherwise sensed was a stain on the army's honor.¹⁴⁶

The man wasn't alone. So far as the soldiers were concerned, turning freed women and children away was not something anyone took pride in. It was simply something that had to be done given the basic circumstances of the March, or so they told themselves. But the problem with this overall posture is that it elides the fact that the army made a choice. Sherman, his staff, and the powers-that-be made a choice about who was valuable and who was not. Freed men of a certain age and of a certain willingness to work made the cut; freed women, children, and the old and infirm did not. Now, it would be disingenuous to suggest that the refugee crisis of Sherman's march was all of the army's own making. Similarly, all blame shouldn't be laid at Sherman's feet, no matter how much the buck stopped and started with him and his obsession with military labor. But choices do have consequences, and because of the choices the army made, thousands of freed refugees were left shorn of any concern for their protection or well-being and with few options beside march along at the end of the columns. It was a matter of the army reaping the kind of crisis it sowed, and soon everyone would learn the bitter fruit of its choices as news of an incident involving pulled up bridges and a Confederate cavalry attack began filling the pages of the Northern press.

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As late November faded into early December, with Sherman's columns inching closer and closer to the coast, the number of refugees following the army continued to grow.

"Contraband negroes, both male and female, are now along with the different columns in great

¹⁴⁶ George Ward Nichols, *The Story of the Great March*, 71; Henry Fales Perry, *History of the Thirty-Eighth. Regiment Indiana Volunteer Infantry, One of the Three Hundred Fighting Regiments of the Union Army in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865* (Palo Alto, CA: F.A. Stuart, 1906), 185.

numbers,” reported an Illinois private from a camp just south of Waynesboro. “Convalescent horses, mules, and refugee slaves, have accumulated in immense numbers,” agreed an Indiana man writing from the same camp. One Ohioan marching in the other wing summed the situation like this: “March by day—winding columns, glittering muskets, glowing flags, General’s cavalcade, wagon trains, stragglers, and thousands of negroes in the rear, stretching over miles” Similarly, Samuel Storrow, the New Englander, spared nothing when he wrote that the “number of negroes that flock to our columns is enormous.” “Not only do men flock to us,” he wrote, “but women with infants in their arms and a lot more scarcely able to walk than tag along with the troops.”¹⁴⁷

One of the basic challenges the refugees faced while marching along behind the army was simply trying to keep up. The columns moved fast, and they didn’t wait. The soldiers charged ahead and left the refugees to their own devices. Remaining together as a family was a problem as well—especially when man and beast crowded the roads while wagons rumbled along in between. It was easy to get split up, and it was especially easy for young children to lose their way and get caught among the stampede. One soldier remembered specifically a time just past Milledgeville, near the Oconee River, when “all was crowded and in confusion,” with “marching troops, wagons, cannon, ambulances and horsemen being packed together in a mass and all moving onward.” Apparently, a child of about seven or eight, he tells us, had gotten stranded from his family and was now “dodging this wagon and that horse” and crying out for his mother. The men driving the teams cracked their whips and screamed for him to get out of the way, but the child kept running and kept crying until he was too far out of earshot for the

¹⁴⁷ Payne, *History of the Thirty-Fourth Regiment of Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 108; Hight, *History of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment of the Indiana Volunteer Infantry*, 425; Stevenson, *History of the 78th O.V.V.I.*, 312-313; Samuel Storrow, Letter to his Mother, *Samuel Storrow Papers*.

soldier to hear. “Where was his mammy?” the soldier asked himself. “Did he find her that night, or the next morning, or ever?” he asked again, admitting “I’ve often wondered about it after all these years.”¹⁴⁸

When it came to making the March and staying together, those that traveled with the help of a horse or carriage had an obvious advantage. For one thing, wagons, carts, and horses mitigated the problem of sore feet. They also kept freed families high and dry and out of the mud, though wheels could always mire up and the clomp-clomp of a horse’s gait could kick-up sludge nearly head high. Important as well was that carriages and wagons provided extra storage, giving families room to stow away trunks of clothes and blankets and baskets of food. David P. Conyngham, the Irish journalist, wrote that he often saw families piloting “buggies and wagons” loaded down with supplies, usually while the pack animals that led the carts hauled their own set of “hampers and bags” full of food and other valuables—including slabs of turkey or bacon draped to the sides. Unquestionably, though, the biggest benefit to having some kind of vehicle—be it a horse or full carriage—was that it provided families a home base, a place to retreat to when things became frantic and a place to pitch camp when the army stopped and the night grew dark and dangerous. As simple as it sounds, these were the things that made all the difference.¹⁴⁹

Carriages or a wagon made such a difference in part because the March was dangerous and freed people were vulnerable. Impressment lurked around everyone corner. Re-enslavement also remained a distinct possibility. But there was power in numbers, and there was power in having some capital to call your own, whether it was a horse, a wagon, a ham, or maybe even a

¹⁴⁸ Rood, *Story of the Service of Company E, and of the Twelfth Wisconsin Regiment*, 366.

¹⁴⁹ Conyngham, *Sherman’s March Through the South*, 277.

weapon. Plus, lest we forget, the rear-end of Sherman's army was not only a place where order and protocol broke down, it was a place that attracted rogues and urchins in the form of stragglers and bummers, rascally characters that hung on the army like stink on a skunk. These were the people, remember, who did the worst of the foraging and paid no mind to Sherman's directives. They simply swept into a plantation after official foraging parties had left and took what they wanted before retreating back the outer-edges of the army where they suckled themselves on the chaos it created. Though there is little direct evidence to suggest that the refugees came into conflict with the bummers, it isn't much of a stretch to imagine that it happened. It also doesn't matter. The refugees still had to share the road and share it with a class of people known for not having any scruples. For a people cut-loose and unprotected, that was threatening enough.

Danger didn't just lurk at the rear. It laid up ahead, too, and the worst of these dangers went undetected until it was far too late—that is, until huge chunks of road exploded into the sky. There were mines. The confederate army mined the roads—not every road, but some of the advance causeways into Savannah and enough to make the columns think twice before proceeding apace. Sherman seethed over them. He saw their use as a vile, cowardly breach of the laws of war. Not to be outdone, however, whenever the army slowed to examine what it suspected was a mined road, Sherman ordered Confederate prisoners to do all the examining, an act of retribution that made Hitchcock gasp but drew nothing but praise and affection among the rank and file. The question is: did freed refugees ever trip any of the mines? Recorded evidence says no, but who says a group of freed refugees trying to get where the army was going might have gotten there too soon, before anyone could sweep the field and clear the road? We also have

to remember who cleared the roads: the Pioneers, a unit comprised of increasing numbers of freed men.¹⁵⁰

Still, even with these dangers to worry about, the most constant threat was always the most obvious: a chance encounter with Confederate cavalry. Wheeler's mounted cavalry hovered around the army as it moved and didn't think twice of attacking freed people in the process. In a way, the free refugees were easy targets. After all, they were right on the road, and their lines stretched out behind the army, making them especially vulnerable. Charles D. Kerr, the soldier who sat atop his horse and watched as the horror of Ebenezer Creek unfolded before him, wrote that "marauding bands" of Wheeler's men "followed the columns like an avenging Nemesis, scourging and killing all negroes who were suspected of giving comfort to the enemy." To make matters worse, the journeys that freed people made to the army often required traversing spaces that Wheeler's men scouted and patrolled, which only added to the danger and increased the likelihood of encountering mounted Confederates. Hence, reports like the one from a Texas cavalry officer that claimed to have "whipped about 1,000 negroes, who were on their way to the enemy." Or this official report from Wheeler himself describing how his cavalry would attack the army's lines at night: "By breaking up the camp during the extreme darkness a great many negroes were left in our hands, whom we sent back to their owners," he wrote, estimating that the "whole number of negroes captured from the enemy during the movement was nearly 2,000."¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ See Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 387-389.

¹⁵¹ Scott, Paul, ed. "With Tears in Their Eyes: On the Road to the Sea: Shannon's Scouts." *Civil War Times Illustrated* 21 (January 1983), 28 quoted in *Ibid.*, 185; *O.R. Ser. 1*, Vol. 44., 410. See also, Charles D. Kerr, "From Atlanta to Raleigh," *Glimpses of the Nation's Struggles*, Vol. 1 (1888), 214.

The task for the refugees was to thus become part of a shadow that barely recognized them. They had to stay right on the army's heels, which sometimes meant evading Confederate cavalry and journeying away from the road. "Larger caravans of negroes than before followed our war-path," wrote an Illinois soldier from somewhere south of Louisville, noting that the refugees were frequently "cut-off by the enemy's cavalry, but by circuitous routes and much hard marching, would make their appearance again." It also meant moving a bit like the southern tide. The lines of soldiers and refugees would no doubt get extended during the day, but on toward dusk, as the army slowed and prepped for camp, the refugees closed the gap. They marched and marched and pressed into the army as close as they could. "*Compelled* to march at the rear (italics added)," wrote a soldier with the One-Hundred and Fourth Illinois, "they [the refugees] were frequently all night in catching up, not daring to sleep outside our pickets." He explained that some "large parties" would even "attach themselves to certain brigades," being sure to "learn the names and numbers of the regiments" so that they could "reach the commands during the night."¹⁵²

It is important to stop for a moment and recognize what this kind-of persistent movement accomplished. The army denied the freed refugees blanket refuge, but by marching in step with the columns and remaining in such close proximity to Sherman's men, the freed people at the end of the lines created a form of refuge for themselves. It was a refuge that was never completely solidified. Nor was it always effective in shielding freed people from danger. It may even be completely inappropriate to think of it as refuge at all since it was never all that secure to begin with. Nonetheless, the freed refugees possessed a keen sense of the army's reach and knew

¹⁵² Kinnear, *History of the Eighty-Sixth Regiment, Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 84. William Calkins, *The History of the One Hundred and Fourth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry* (Chicago: Donahue & Henneberry, 1895), 259.

that if they could press into the army, they could still avail themselves of its power and protection. They knew, in other words, that though denied asylum within the corporal confines of the army, they could still make the best of a bad situation by conceiving of refuge as entirely elastic and relational, as a somewhat fluid and ongoing relationship to the army and all its power. This sort of relationship never guaranteed their safety, much less their freedom, but it did make those things a little more secure. It also reinforced the idea that the refugees had a *right* to refuge and a *right* to claim the army's power as their own, which were both powerful ideas about what freedom meant to them.

At the same time, the refugees' movement into the army's lines could be about attaining practical necessities like food or shelter as much as any broad notion of refuge. One soldier admitted that once the refugees came into the lines, the army felt compelled to offer whatever forage could be found. This general spirit typically applied to shelter and other provisions as well. Pressing into the lines would have also been an occasion for freed people to find work within the regiments as valets, teamsters, or cooks, so there was a baseline level of practical sustenance at stake in following the army so closely. There is also something to be said for how the refugees pressed into camp for inclusions sake. Given that the army's overall posture was to pretend that the refugees weren't there, pressing deep into the army's lines on a nightly basis was a simple of way of being seen. It was a way a way of being heard, and it was a way forcing the soldiers into the seeing the March as something that both the refugees and the soldiers each had a stake in. One could certainly see this as yet another attempt to build refuge from the ground up, but in its most basic sense, pressing into camp served as a practical appeal for inclusion, empathy, and at the very least, a little help.

The problem was that recognition was never enough. While it is true that the refugees pressed into the camps on such a regular basis that they became nighttime fixtures among the army, inclusion came with a caveat: the refugees still had to work. The difference was that now the soldiers expected a different kind of labor—something less menial though no less demeaning. Night after night the soldiers called the refugees before the evening glow of a thousand campfires and made them entertain. They obliged the refugees to dance and sing and strum banjos while the soldiers all slapped knees and cackled into the cool night air. Rice K. Bull, a New Yorker, described the evening festivities as a “new and constant source of fun:”

After the Negroes began to follow our army these “contrabands” swarmed our camp at night; they could sing and dance and the boys kept them busy. They sang the plantation hymns and songs and it was as natural for them to dance as to breathe. They often had banjos which they strummed for music; when they had no banjos our boys would beat time on their knees with their hands.

James P. Connelly, the Indiana private, recalled similar scenes, writing about one stop near Louisville in which the “refugee negroes” performed a “regular plantation dance.” Those not dancing “stand in a ring around the dancers” and sang as “loud and as fast and as furious as they can,” he claimed, noting that actual freed people were far more amusing than the common minstrel show. He also couldn’t help but acknowledge the oddity that here he was fighting a war deep in enemy territory and he had spent the evening laughing so hard for so long that his “head and sides” ached.¹⁵³

The laughter was the point. Mind you, it’s possible to read some good-will out of these moments. John R. McBride spoke for himself as well as others when he wrote that the refugees’ “plaintive songs” and frequent dances “touched the kindly nature of the great body of soldiers,”

¹⁵³ Rice K. Bull, *Soldiering*, 197; Connelly, *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland*, 332-333.

which, in his telling, induced the men to treat the refugees as “humanely as the *circumstances would permit* (italics added).” But the jeering laughter and gut-crunching hysterics of all the on looking soldiers droned out the degrees of goodwill being shared. Moreover, power was distributed as such that the refugees couldn’t say no. For every gathering that might have started spontaneous on the part of the freed refugees, there were equal numbers if not more that happened because the soldiers demanded it. The soldier’s ‘got the contrabands’ together, as was typically said, a phrasing that understates the power dynamics in play but still demonstrates that it was the soldiers who initiated these late evening hootenannies for their own amusement, often as if a perfect nightcap to a long day’s march. It was thus incumbent upon freed people to dance for their place within the lines or risk being blocked from camp. Again, the laughter was point. Even as the refugees pressed into camp and attained refuge for themselves, inclusion came with a cost.¹⁵⁴

Once south of about Louisville (pronounced *Lewisville*), the army rose from their camps each morning to face a new reality. Georgia’s landscape was changing and becoming more of an obstacle with every passing day. Confirmation hung on the trees. One soldier wrote from around Millen that for the first time in his life he had seen Spanish moss, the stringy shag-like substance common to the coastal regions of Georgia and South Carolina, a place where water and road tend to meet and intermix like folded arms. Days later one of his compatriots wrote similarly about seeing his first cypress swamp. What distinguishes a cypress swamp from your average old swamp? Cypress swamps, the man wrote, “are so full of cypress trees that they seem almost impenetrable.” The thick trunks of the bald cypress sit deep in brackish water while their tops sprout up like prison bars above the water. For Sherman’s army of Midwesterners, these were the

¹⁵⁴ McBride, *History of the Thirty-Third Indiana Veteran Volunteer Infantry*, 154.

signs that they were now closer to Savannah than either Macon or Milledgeville and that the gentle, rolling hills of middle Georgia were a thing of the past. From here on out, marching now meant driving headlong into the Lowcountry—a labyrinth-like task that saw the shine of the March recede into the swamp.¹⁵⁵

In addition to all the swamps, what made the Lowcountry such a difficult country to cross was that it was lined with rivers. Even if easily fordable, rivers were hell on an army's operations. The columns had to slow down, stop, build bridges, then start again, all while burning daylight hours and sitting out like sitting ducks for a Confederate cavalry charge. The soldiers all knew how difficult things had become. "As the army advanced more impediments were met," complained one Illinois soldier, saying that "Streams became more numerous, deeper and broader, and swamps more difficult to pass." In some cases, he wrote that the men "were forced to wade for long distances in water sometimes waist-deep." The same soldier who saw his first bit of Spanish moss also described how every major channel had an abundance of streams that ran alongside the main channel, making it terribly hard to move with any speed at all. "Streams or water swamps are so numerous that we can now not learn their names anymore," wrote another Illinois soldier, as if to concur. Even worse, Confederate cavalry had taken to felling trees over the road, which only added to the frustration of having to stop and start only to stop and start again. The March had slowed to a crawl.¹⁵⁶

Another issue was that Georgia's natural abundance was no more. The once pregnant earth was growing slim and barren. Georgia's seemingly endless stores of corn and sweet

¹⁵⁵ Hight, *History of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment of the Indiana Volunteer Infantry*, 425. Fleharty, *Our Regiment*, 120.

¹⁵⁶ *The Story of the Fifty-Fifth Illinois Regiment in the Civil War*, 396. Hight, *History of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment of the Indiana Volunteer Infantry*, 425.; Alfred H. Trego Diary, 1864. Manuscripts Collection. Chicago Historical Society quoted in Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 349.

potatoes had slowly given way to landscape fit for little besides rice—something which the soldiers never knew quite what to do with. For the first time, a sense set in among the army that Sherman's enterprising foragers might return empty handed. It didn't help that Wheeler's cavalry had grown more dogged in their resistance. In addition to felling trees over the roadways, they had begun to lay waste to whatever might aid Sherman's advance. They drove off cattle, slaughtered pigs, and destroyed what rice and corn they couldn't carry in their saddlebags. They also had a penchant for flooding fields, which ruined crops and caused swampy bottom-lands to swell up over roadways. All these things made it that much more difficult for the army to move and sustain itself, giving some belief to Sherman's fears that the army might stall out before it ever reached Savannah.

As a result, the calculation changed. Earlier in the campaign, when there were few swamps to wade through and an abundance of forage to go around, the army contented itself to let the freed refugees congregate in the rear. Now Sherman's four columns endeavored to turn as many freed people back as possible—not just recent arrivals, but everyone, even those that had been with army for weeks on end. It was an attempt to turn back the clock on the past month's-worth of Marching and renege on what had otherwise been a tacit policy. "Negroes swarmed us today," wrote an Illinois private, from the banks of the Ogeechee River. "Saw 30 or 40 turned back," he continued, insisting that it was "Sherman's order not to let anymore go with us than we can feed." "The darkeys had well-nigh become an unbearable nuisance as there was a whole army of them," croaked another from near Buckhead Creek, admitting that Sherman wanted to "check their Crowding us (sic)." One Illinois Cavalry officer previewed the feeble resignation that would gradually become the army's default position when he wrote from the near side of

Ebenezer Creek that “The negroes come to our lines by hundreds, but we can do nothing for them.”¹⁵⁷

There wasn’t always an army wide consensus on how and to what degree this general retrenchment should take place. In fact, sometimes the speed and severity to which the columns turned back freed refugees depended on who-outranked-who and what Sherman’s lieutenants thought was fitting and proper. Command was delegated up and down the lines, and since the army fanned out over miles, there were a number of officers in charge of deciding what should be done about the refugees. Some were more restrained than others. If the refugees were fortunate, they would have come into camp under the watchful eye of someone like Absalom Baird, a division commander of the Fourteenth Corps, who Connelly described as being “quite an abolitionist.” Baird, Connelly wrote, always delighted in talking with the refugees and even invited a young freed refugee to ride along with he and his staff. But for every Absalom Baird leading the ranks there was a Jefferson C. Davis, an “ardent pro-slavery man,” in the words of one soldier, whose orders to pull up the bridges brought the issue to a tragic head on the frostbitten banks of Ebenezer Creek.¹⁵⁸

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¹⁵⁷ Orendorf, et al. *Reminiscences of the Civil War from the Diaries of the 103rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 164; David Gould and James B. Kennedy, eds, *Memoirs of a Dutch Mudsill: The ‘War Memories’ of John Henry Otto, Captian, Company D, 21st Regiment, Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2004), 306; *Ninety Second Illinois Volunteers*, 196.

¹⁵⁸ Connelly, *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland*, 339. Hight, *History of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment of the Indiana Volunteer Infantry*, 426-427.

He had a traitorous name. Jefferson Columbus Davis—the head of Sherman’s Fourteenth Army Corps—shared an appellation with Jefferson Finis Davis, the angular-faced Confederate President and Commander-in-Chief. By the time Sherman’s army embarked on its now famous march, infamy followed Davis wherever he went and not just for the misfortune of his name. It happened in Louisville back in 1862. Davis had reported there after convalescing at his home in southern Indiana, but things got out of hand when a conflict arose between he and General William “Bull” Nelson, the commanding officer in charge of the city. It was a matter of personal offence. Nelson insulted Davis during their first meeting by questioning Davis’s competence for command. Weeks later on a return trip to Louisville, Davis waltzed up to Nelson and demanded an apology, but the hulking, three-hundred-pound general just scoffed the diminutive Davis away. “Go away you damned puppy,” is what Nelson is reported to have said, which sent Davis a-boiling. He crinkled up a resignation letter he had in his pocket out of rage and flipped the wad of paper in Nelson’s face, an insult Nelson responded to by backhanding Davis across the cheek.¹⁵⁹

What happened next should have had Davis hung. He left Nelson and stalked the city in search of gun. When he found what he had been looking for he returned to the Galt House Hotel where Nelson had his headquarters. He marched right into the lobby, straight up to the general’s office, pulled back the hammer, aimed, and shot Nelson dead. Stunned witnesses later reported that after slaying Nelson, Davis never tried to run. He never acted bothered. He just stood there stoically stooping over Nelson’s rotund body until the authorities whisked him away. Though arrested, Davis was never charged. His friend and fellow U.S. General Horatio Wright managed to get Davis released on account of the U.S. army’s dire need for good-fighting men at the front,

¹⁵⁹ Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr. and Gordon D. Whitney, *Jefferson Davis In Blue: The Life of Sherman’s Relentless Warrior* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2002).

an appeal that coincided with the federal army's campaign for Kentucky. It worked like a charm. Davis never saw so much as a trial. He returned to the army and worked his way back up the chain-of-command, though his murdering Nelson wasn't something that anyone ever forgot. Everyone knew that beneath those hollow, sunken eyes Jefferson C. Davis had the heart of a stone-cold killer.¹⁶⁰

Despite his well-earned reputation for being about as low and as mean as snake's belly in a wagon rut, Davis was one of Sherman's best men. He and his long beard and perpetual frown had been with Sherman since Chattanooga, and he had especially proven himself in the rolling fight for Atlanta. He now found himself in charge of the outermost column of Sherman's left wing, which was an important, if winding, route. Since leaving Milledgeville, he had angled his men through Louisville and Millen while making a slight feint toward Augusta, the city most everyone had thought was Sherman's target; he now occupied a path that placed him closest to the Savannah River, which meant that he and his column faced the worst of the rivers and the swampiest ground. The engineers were repeatedly called on to lay out pontoons and get the army from one side of a stream to the next. There were also near constant reports of Confederate cavalry being spotted hovering off the roads. Trees had been felled all around, and at certain points, once within earshot of the city, soldiers began hearing the low echo of cannons firing off in the distance.

Freed people had been following Davis's column for some time now. "A large number of Negroes, principally women, have been allowed to follow in the wake of the army," wrote one of Davis's men from early December, just south of Louisville. This growing crowd had been grating on Davis since in the first few weeks of the campaign. Of all Sherman's subordinate

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

generals, he was the only one to complain of them directly and in writing. “Useless negroes are being accumulated to an extent which would be suicide to a column which must be constantly stripped for battle and prepared for the utmost celerity of movement,” he wrote back in Eatonton. “We cannot expect that the present unobstructed march will continue much longer,” he pled before going on, “Our wagons are too much overladen to allow of their being tilled with negro women and children or their baggage, and every additional mouth consumes food, which it requires risk to obtain.” He was building his case. In his next line, he imposed new orders. He would no longer allow freed refugees to ride along in wagons and only “the servants of mounted officers” would be allowed horses or mules. It was an early act of deterrence, and this hardline would get harder still.¹⁶¹

Davis first drew this harder line along a stream known as Buckhead Creek. Fairly shallow and not quite as imposing as some of the other bodies of water that lay closer to the coast, what happened at Buckhead Creek was a preview of what would happen at Ebenezer Creek. Col. John Hight, a member of a Wisconsin regiment in Davis’s division, called it as scene “disgraceful to American history.” Davis—described by Col. Hight as a “military tyrant, without one spark of humanity”—ordered the bridges pulled up before the freed refugees had a chance to cross, a decision even more dastardly than it sounds given the circumstances. According to Hight, Confederate cavalry had been spotted following close at the column’s rear, and everyone knew as army-wide knowledge that to leave the refugees stranded on the opposite bank was to hand them over to Wheeler and his men, a result that would end in one of two ways. Wheeler’s men would either murder or re-enslave them, which meant subjecting them to the punishments

¹⁶¹ Michael H. Fitch, *Echoes of the Civil War as I Hear Them* (New York: R.F. Fenno & Co., 1905), 236; *O.R.* Ser. 1, Vol. 44., 502.

reserved for runaway slaves. These were the consequences, and to take Hight's word for it, everyone knew them.¹⁶²

Nevertheless, Davis had his orders carried out, setting in motion a scene that would repeat itself days later. Cries of alarm went up with the bridges and grew louder and louder as more refugees realized they were being abandoned. Then panic set in. "The rebels are coming," someone shouted erroneously, a false alarm that nonetheless sent groups of men and women plunging into the river while others ran "wildly up and down the bank, shrieking with terror and crying for help." Ultimately, the river proved passable, so the freed refugees fought the current and came up from the bank cold and wet but safely on the other side. But not everyone made it across. Some who went into the water never returned, though how many exactly was never quite known. One soldier estimated that only a small number had died in the melee. Another soldier expressed amazement that so many had made it all, writing that as many as five hundred "were left on the wrong side of the river sure enough, but when we broke camp next morning they were all there again all the same." "By what means they had crossed," the man admitted, "I do not know."¹⁶³

Pulling up the bridges to block the refugees became Davis's calling card. It happened here at Buckhead Creek as well as later with much more tragic results at Ebenezer Creek, but it seems he launched this same ploy again on at least one other occasion in the intervening days, likely at a crossing of stream known as Rocky Comfort Creek. In this particular case, the stream wasn't all that deep, so the refugees waded across without much trouble. Moreover, Hight tells us that the freed people had grown far less trusting of the army and had started relying more on

¹⁶² Hight, *History of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment of the Indiana Volunteer Infantry*, 426-427.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*; Fitch, *Echoes of the Civil War*, 236; Gould and Kennedy, eds., *Memoirs of a Dutch Mudsill*, 306.

“their own efforts and ingenuity,” meaning that the refugees had started finding their own ways to cross without worrying over the army’s bridges, which begs the question: how many more times did Davis pull this stunt before the tragedy at Ebenezer Creek? The answer isn’t all that clear. What is clear was that it became a pattern. It was premeditated and repeated. Davis kept trying to block the refugees, even after disaster was so narrowly averted back at Buckhead Creek, proving once again that the army reaped the kind-of crisis it sowed. Davis and those in charge knew exactly what was at stake, yet they kept pulling up bridges whenever they got the chance.¹⁶⁴

The crossing at Ebenezer Creek was thus a disaster in the making. The water was cold, and the river sat right in the heart of what James Austin Connelly described as “the most gloomy, dismal cypress swamp that I saw.” The road that everyone lined up on was little more than a narrow causeway with low-lying swamps surrounding each side, a path giving the men little room to move and no room for error. Up ahead somewhere cannons boomed. Everyone could hear them and expected that Savannah must be close, but no one knew for sure because all anyone could see were trees. The columns actually sat in this narrow corridor for quite some time. Wheeler’s men had done a prodigious job tearing up the roads, and it took as much as a night for the engineering corps to cut down the timbers needed to replace the road. In the meantime, the *pop, pop, pop* of rifles went off somewhere toward the army’s rearguard as Wheeler’s men decided to skirmish with Davis’s stalled army. “It was a mean business to fight in the swamp,” admitted one soldier, noting that the next day, “We krept (sic) out of the tangled

¹⁶⁴ Hight, *History of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment of the Indiana Volunteer*, 427.

mas (sic) of cypress knees and vines toward the road.” The army was moving again and finally crossing the creek.¹⁶⁵

James Austin Connelly saw everything coming. Prior to the crossing he had ridden with one of Davis’s aides and found another of his aides “turning off the road, into the swamp all of the fugitive negroes that came along,” presumably not to let anyone cross the bridge before the army. “When we should cross I knew it was the intention that the bridge should be burned, and I inquired if the negroes were not to be permitted to cross,” he wrote. The aide then told him what he already knew, that Davis had indeed ordered them to block the freed refugees from using the bridge. “This I knew, and Genl. Davis knew must result in all these negroes being captured or brutally shot down by the rebel cavalry tomorrow morning,” Connelly claimed as he imagined the shouts and screams and implications of the tragedy now coming together in his mind. “The idea of five or six hundred black women, children, and old men thus returned to slavery by such an infernal copperhead as Jeff C. Davis was entirely too much for my Democracy,” he admitted, saying that he gave the aides a severe tongue-lashing, letting them know just what he “thought of such an inhuman, barbarous proceeding in language which may possibly result in a reprimand.” Little good it did. Connelly could see the tragedy coming, but Davis had his trap set and ready to go.¹⁶⁶

What happened along the banks of Ebenezer Creek once the bridge went up was nothing short of horrifying. Cries rang out across the water; men, women, and children all felt the nervous grip of impending terror as they realized what was unfolding. The true sign of their

¹⁶⁵ Connelly, *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland*, 353; Gould and Kennedy, eds., *Memoirs of a Dutch Mudsill*, 310-311.

¹⁶⁶ Connelly, *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland*, 356-357.

abandonment came after the army pulled up the bridge, and the last rear guard burned what was left of the bridge rather than leave it operable, a clear, smoldering indication of the army's intention. The quick thinking and resourceful refugees got to work building make-shift rafts out of fallen limbs. Sympathetic soldiers on the other side felled tall pines across the water to act as bridges or rails to get everyone across. Some refugees, especially the men, just went straight on into the water, hoping to swim across and maybe get help on the opposite bank. "It was a really pitiful to see them. They are afraid of the rebels and begged hard to get over," recalled an Indiana soldier, who witnessed it all and remembered that "Some of the men swam the river but the women and children could not get over."¹⁶⁷

Then came Wheeler and his men. "The rear guard had no sooner crossed the creek than Wheeler's cavalry charged into the crowd of refugees," remembered William Passmore Carlin, one of Sherman's subordinate generals. "The Rebels came up and fired into them," recalled a soldier. Whole groups of refugees leapt into the water as bedlam broke out on the near bank; others ran up and down the water's edge trying to escape. Some even tried to crawl under the river bank in a desperate attempt for cover. Screams and shrieks and shouts and shots rose out of the chaos. The water splashed. Bullets ripped in the river, whizzing past those fighting the current. Men and women tried to swim, often with one hand holding on to loved ones and the other treading water in an attempt to swim toward the far bank. Soldiers standing on the opposite side started throwing logs and sticks and old planks—*anything*—into the water, so that those splashing and swimming might have some help in getting to the other side. The Irish journalist David P. Conyngham described it all as like the crossing of the "Red Sea" absent God's protection. "Wheeler's men charged them," he wrote, "driving them pell-mell into" a deep, dark

¹⁶⁷ William B. Miller Diary, Gibson County Civil War Papers, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, IN. quoted in Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 382. See also Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 382-383.

stream whose current swept mothers from children and pulled others under, with some never to return.¹⁶⁸

Once the firing ceased and the top of the water turned still and placid, soldiers watched as men and women remerged. They drug themselves up from the water, through the dense underbrush, and up onto the opposite bank. It was a sad and dismal sight that relayed the extent of what had happened. Most had on very little clothing, recalled an Illinois private, who acknowledged that what coverings anyone did have on was dripping wet. Groups of forlorn survivors huddled by fires lit and set by the soldiers, with everyone all shivering from the cold and “the poor women and children crying as if their hearts would break.” It was clear that not everyone had made it. The same Illinois private noticed that a woman whom he had met only three days before and declared that “she would go with us or perish” no longer traveled with the small child that had previously accompanied her. The man presumed the child dead. Only a short while later the man noticed another broken family trying to gather themselves in the aftermath of the Massacre. Both husband and wife had made it across by swimming but their little boy had drowned. The mother was now crying—likely an inconsolable, weeping cry, the kind that only comes from the heart-wrenching pain of mother realizing the loss of a child. “The sights I this morning witnessed I cannot get out of my mind,” wrote the soldier, obviously disturbed by all he had seen.¹⁶⁹

Exactly how many refugees went into the water and never came out is a number that will never be known. The same is true for the number of freed people apprehended and either killed

¹⁶⁸ Carlin, *Memoirs*, 157-158; *Ninety Second Illinois Volunteers*, 197; Conyngham, *Sherman’s March Through the South*, 277.

¹⁶⁹ *Ninety Second Illinois Volunteers*, 197-198.

or re-enslaved by Wheeler's cavalry. All we have to go on are anecdotal reports and personal recollections, but even with spotty sources, all signs indicate that what happened along the banks of Ebenezer Creek was a betrayal both tragic and haunting. Carlin reported that "Many women leaped into the water, some with children in their arms. Some drowned; some were reported to have been killed by the Confederate cavalry. The remainder were held as former prisoners and sent back to their former masters." Another soldier agreed, writing that "some drowned" and that it was "also certain that many of the old and infirm perished by the way." Charles Kerr later wrote that he saw hundreds plunging into the "turbid stream." "I speak of what I saw with my own eyes," he wrote. "It is claimed that this was done because rations were becoming scarce; in short, that it was military necessity. But there was no necessity about it," he would later write, insisting "it was unjustifiable and perfidious, and across the stretch of twenty years my soul burns with indignation tonight as I recall it."¹⁷⁰

The soldiers' initial reaction upon was to condemn Jeff C. Davis. "I cannot find the words to express my detestation of such cruelty and wickedness," John Hight wailed as he exclaimed, "May God Almighty save this nation from the responsibility of General Davis's acts!" Hight wasn't alone. Soldiers seemed to all pin the blame on Davis and didn't hold back in damning him to Hell. "Let the 'Iron Pen' of history write the comment on this action of a Union general," wrote the Illinoisan. "If I had the power I would have him [hanged] as high as Haman," agreed James Comfort Patten, an Indiana medic. "There is great indignation among the troops," Patten went on, suggested that outrage had apparently spread so far and wide that Patten believed Davis ought to have feared for his life. For his part, Connelly threatened Davis in a different way. After cursing Davis's aides prior to the bridge being pulled up, he vowed to "expose this

¹⁷⁰ Carlin, *Memoirs*, 157-158; Calkins, *The History of the One Hundred and Fourth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 259; Kerr, "From Atlanta to Raleigh," 216.

act of his publicly,” then threatened, “if he [Davis] undertakes to vent his spleen on me for it, I have the *same rights that he himself exercised in his affair with Nelson*,” a reference to Davis’s murdering Nelson over a personal offence back in Louisville. Apparently, Connelly’s vow to expose Davis was legitimate. He reportedly penned a letter about the incident at Ebenezer Creek to his congressman, who then forwarded the letter over to *The New York Times*, though no such letter of his has ever been found.¹⁷¹

The Massacre at Ebenezer Creek was a watershed moment in the short history of Sherman’s March. For the soldiers, the guilt of having betrayed the refugees combined with first person testimonies of how freed people went to such great lengths (and lost so much) to cross the river inspired a newfound sympathy for the refugees and their plight. “And what is it all for? Freedom. They are periling their lives for freedom, and it seems to me that any people who run such risks are entitled to freedom,” insisted the Illinois private who saw it all. Jacob D. Cox, an early historian of the March, concurred, writing that Ebenezer Creek demonstrated to the soldiers that “it was literally preferable to die as freemen than live as slaves,” a growing sentiment that spanned the army and altered how soldiers understood the meaning of emancipation. For the refugees, the crossing of Ebenezer Creek was such a watershed because it changed everything. People died, people mourned, families had been shattered, and the survivors wore the remnants of the crossing in the threads of their dampened clothes. It was also a proverbial point of no return. Marching ahead now meant living with an un-erasable trauma, and those that might have

¹⁷¹ Hight, *History of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment of the Indiana Volunteer*, 452; *Ninety Second Illinois Volunteers*, 200; James G. Althern, ed. “An Indiana Doctor Marches with Sherman: The Diary of James Comfort Patten,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, Vol. 49, No. 4. (Dec. 1953), 419-420; Connelly, *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland*, 355.

wanted to turn back couldn't. They could neither re-cross the river nor risk facing Wheeler's men. It was now Savannah or bust.¹⁷²

Another reason that the Massacre at Ebenezer Creek was such an inflection point for Sherman and his march was that it had political implications far beyond the wagon roads that led to the coast. Word of the Massacre soon got out. In pieces and in fragments Northern newsreaders soon learned of a treacherous betrayal at the hands of the U.S. army. In turn, news of Ebenezer Creek—even if only ever told without a full accounting of what really happened—slowly became the central plank in a much larger narrative positing that Sherman and his men turned their backs on the freed people following the army and shirked responsibility for seeing emancipation through. Though this general narrative never came close to matching the triumphal reports of how Sherman subdued Georgia and rode into Savannah a conquering hero, it did undercut Sherman's standing among politicians and policy makers back home, and it had the added effect of potentially damaging relationships with African American leaders, thus possibly blunting the army's recruitment of black troops. So what awaited Sherman when he arrived in Savannah was a tangled political knot he dealt with by issuing an order that would transform the work of Reconstruction. The implication: the legacy of Ebenezer Creek went on shaping the South well after the end of the war.

Yet while news of Ebenezer Creek stirred political winds in Washington once the army arrived in Savannah, as of early December, there was still a-good-ways to go. Savannah lay as much twenty-five miles from the river crossing at Ebenezer Creek where the March stopped and tragedy struck, which meant that the long lines of men and women behind the army still had several days of marching ahead of them. Worse, Davis wasn't done. After leaving the swamp

¹⁷² *Ninety Second Illinois Volunteers*, 197; Jacob D. Cox, *The March to the Sea: Franklin and Nashville* (New York: Scribner, 1892), 38.

that surrounded Ebenezer Creek, the men of Sherman's Fourteenth Corps came upon another creek, this one known as Lockner Creek (sometimes spelled Lochner Creek). There, Davis once again launched his awful trick. He ordered his men to pull up the pontoon bridges so that none of the refugees could cross, and as one soldier recalled, "the order was obeyed to the letter." The freed people following the column were left stranded on the opposite bank, where they rushed to the water's edge and begged that they might be let across—all to no avail. The rear-guard simply pulled out and left the refugees to find their own way to the opposite bank, which required wading through another dark stream in the damp Georgia winter. Again, freed people pushed, and the army pulled back. The March, meanwhile, went on. Savannah lay up ahead, and its defensive guns were now as loud as ever.¹⁷³

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When Sherman's army pulled up to the outskirts of Savannah, most, if not all, of the refugees would have been footsore and weary. The March had been ongoing for over a month now, and it wasn't over yet. Some of the refugees had been with the army from as far back as Atlanta and beyond. Most others joined at points along the way. Many hundreds—if not thousands—more had run to the army and joined the march but turned back somewhere in between. "Ten thousand negroes left the plantations of their former masters and accompanied the column when it reached Savannah, without taking note of thousands more who joined the army but from various causes had to leave it at different points," wrote an Iowan marching in Sherman's ranks as he reflected on the month of marching that had just passed. Another soldier put it similarly. "There are thousands of negroes with our army," he wrote from just outside

¹⁷³ Charles D. Keer, "From Atlanta to Raleigh," in *Glimpses of the Nation's Struggle* (Minnesota Military Order of the Loyal Legion), Vol. 1 (St. Paul: St. Paul Book and Stationary, 1887), 215-216. See Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 382.

Savannah. And yet, even with this large number of refugees accompanying army and with all trials of the past month, the refugee experience was still far from over. Savannah would prove not an end, only the end of the beginning.¹⁷⁴

Chapter 4

The Pivot to Port Royal

¹⁷⁴ Smith, *History of the Seventh Iowa*, 209; Payne, *History of the Thirty-Fourth Regiment of Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 177.

On December 13th, mere days after the drownings at Ebenezer Creek, Sherman's "lost army" resurfaced on the coast. That afternoon, as sunset neared, a small federal division over-ran an even smaller Confederate force at Fort McAllister, an earthen redoubt on the banks of the Ogeechee River, just sixteen miles south of Savannah. The quick federal victory—the whole thing lasted only about half an hour—gave Sherman and his men access to the Atlantic, which in turn linked them with the naval vessels waiting offshore and thus the outside world. Soldiers wrote home to their wives and lovers, telling of all they'd done and seen; Sherman wrote Grant for the first time since leaving Atlanta, telling his old friend of all that *he'd* done and seen; and steamers loaded down with supplies made their way upstream to an old river crossing known as King's Bridge, where the army made its temporary headquarters. It was official: after nearly thirty days and close to two-hundred and fifty-miles, they'd made it. The army had marched from Atlanta to the sea. All that was left now was for Savannah to fall and the campaign would be complete.

It didn't happen overnight. For about a week, the March stopped, and the soldiers waited. Sherman sent for the materials needed to lay siege, and once ready and equipped, he demanded the city's surrender on December 17th. A sense of inevitability hung in the salty air. Sherman had about 60,000 men at his disposal; General William J. Hardee, the man leading the only Confederate force left in Savannah, had a measly 13,000 and those mostly inexperienced militia. Plus, with the Ogeechee now under his control, Sherman had all the supplies he needed and could afford to wait; Hardee barely had enough and could hardly wait much longer. Even worse for Hardee and the Confederates, Sherman could just about do as he pleased. He had men stationed to the city's south and west, and he had another wing bearing down from the north while the naval blockade eliminated any chance of a seaside escape. The walls had effectively

closed in. Hardee had one option besides surrender and that was to retreat back into the swamps of South Carolina.

In the meantime, as the federal army waited at the gates of Savannah, the war arrived on Georgia's coast. Soldiers descended upon plantations not once or twice but three and four times over. In some cases, whole estates went up in flames; in others, artillery shells whizzed overhead as soldiers dug siege lines out of old rice canals. At the same time, the slow unraveling of Georgia's slave system—a fraying that had begun way back in the push for Atlanta and gained such an enormous steam during the March to the Sea—wound down to its last threads. Enslaved people and their families absconded into the night, systems of deference, custom, and control all broke down, an entire world collapsed. The bonds between enslavers and enslaved people that had governed those coastal communities for more than a century dissolved under the weight of Sherman's army, revealing to the white slaveholders of the Georgia coast that it had all been a delusion—that the things they told themselves to justify slavery had all been lies and that their idyllic, seaside worlds rested on a bedrock of deceit and deception. For some, facing up to this reality was a fate worse than surrender.

Moreover, the army stopping for a little as this brief moment on the outskirts of Savannah segues us to the second part of the story. Before his men had even gotten settled in good in their trenches, Sherman had already started thinking about where he would go next and what he would do with the freed refugees that followed his columns to the coast. His answer—which he probably decided on somewhere south of Milledgeville—was to link up with the U.S. Navy, request as many ships as could be spared, and begin transporting large numbers of refugees up the coast to Port Royal, a federal outpost on the islands just north of Savannah. To Sherman, the move made perfect sense. Not only had Port Royal and the surrounding islands been abandoned

by its white landholders, the U.S. army had been overseeing a kind of “freedman’s colony” there since 1862. There was food. There was security. There were even white agents at Port Royal whose singular purpose was to provide philanthropic support to freed people as they moved out of slavery and into freedom. On the surface, the colony at Port Royal seemed like a place well-suited for precisely this scenario, and Sherman didn’t think twice about shifting responsibility for the refugees somewhere else.

Sherman’s decision to send the refugees to Port Royal marked a major turning point—not for the campaign *per se*, but for the great refugee crisis unfolding in its wake. Over the next several weeks, starting around Christmas, 1864, the army, with help from the navy, transported hundreds, soon-to-be-thousands, of freed refugees up the coast to the small federal enclave at Port Royal. It was an elaborate conveyance. The refugees traveled by boat—usually a steamer or whatever the navy could muster. The journey lasted at least a day and required sailing out in the windswept waters of the Atlantic. It also happened in successive waves as each vessel could only carry so many refugees at a time. Nevertheless, instead of slowing down once the fighting ceased and the marching stopped, the movement of refugees suddenly sped back up, though this time as part of a *forced* movement on to the shores of South Carolina. And it was here, at Port Royal and the surrounding Sea Islands, where the crisis entered a new and even more confusing chapter, a time when crisis turned to disaster and the influx of so many refugees turned Port Royal upside down.

But first, before any of this could happen, Savannah had to fall.

*

“These are days of darkness,” wrote Susan M. Cummings, warning her sister-in-law, Mary Jones, the wife of Charles Colcock Jones: “Expect the enemy.” She wasn’t exaggerating. The war had taken a disastrous turn for one of Georgia’s most prestigious families. Charles, the head of the Jones family, was dead, succumbing to palsy two years earlier; Charles, Jr., the eldest Jones son, was off in Savannah preparing for Sherman’s attack; and Robert Mallard, Mary Jones’s son-in-law, would soon be behind bars, locked away as a prisoner of war after taking up arms against the U.S. government. With Charles dead, Charles, Jr. away, and Robert on the verge of arrest, the Jones women watched in those dark December days as their seaside empire fell as if suddenly made of sand: the people they enslaved were now escaping in large numbers, their varying estates stared into ruin, Southern independence was no longer a dream but a nightmare, and the hour of judgement had finally arrived. Sherman’s army was on the Ogeechee River—and after having almost fled inland earlier in the war, the Jones’s were on the coast with nowhere to run.¹⁷⁵

The Jones family of Georgia operated three different plantations—Arcadia, Montevideo, and Maybank—in Liberty County, a wide coastal county full of sandy plains and tidal pools just south of Savannah. During the short siege of the city, the widowed Mary, wife of Charles Sr., moved to Montevideo with her daughter, Mary Mallard, and a pregnant neighbor, whose husband had taken his guns and took to the swamps. For the next month, bands of soldiers turned their coastal home into a turnstile. “Squads came all day until near dark,” scribbled Mary Mallard in mid-December. “Squads of Yankees came all day,” she wrote again two days later, and so it went until the middle of January. Returning soldiers in groups as large as fifty or more

¹⁷⁵ Mrs. Susan M. Cumming to Mrs. Mary Jones, December 10, 1864 in Robert Manson Myers, *The Children of Pride: The Selected Letters of the Family of the Rev. Dr. Charles Colcock Jones from the Years 1860-1868, with the Addition of Several Previously Unpublished Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 500.

fleeced them of all their chickens, drove off cows, rung-up geese, and that was just in the yard. Inside the house soldiers ransacked the kitchen, broke open chests, and rifled through closets. Some put forward a veneer of courtesy; others went in wildly. One even mocked them by joking about how well the house would burn. “All our pleasant things are laid low,” Jones moaned after nearly a month of it all. “Every trunk, bureau, box, room, closet...and whatever was wanted of provisions, clothing, jewelry, knives, forks, spoons, the whole house turned topsy-turvy,” she cried.¹⁷⁶

The situation was worse for the enslaved. While Jones and her daughter and neighbor hunkered down inside the house, with locks and doors to hide behind and nights spent huddled together in the upstairs bedroom, enslaved people met the soldiers head on. They met them out in the yard on the proverbial front-line, where they had few defenses and little to fall back on by way of protection. The result was successive waves of theft and abuse. Enslaved people had their cabins turned over, their possessions taken, even basic items like blankets and beds, and they had to guard their own lives. In one instance, a soldier threatened to “blow out the brains” of Cato, the carriage driver, if he kept feeding the family’s cow; another once grabbed Sue, a young enslaved woman, by the collar and drug her upstairs before someone confronted him, which gave the young girl a chance to escape. It apparently wasn’t the only time any such incident like this occurred, for Mary Mallard reported that “the negro men were obliged to stay at their houses for the protection of their wives.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Entries for December 17th and 19th in Mary Mallard Journal in Robert Manson Myers, *The Children of Pride*, 512; Entry for January 7th, Mary Jones Journal in Robert Manson Myers, *The Children of Pride*, 524; See also, Erskine Clarke, *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Odyssey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 433-437.

¹⁷⁷ Entry for December 21st in Mary Mallard Journal in Robert Manson Myers, *The Children of Pride*, 514; Entry for December 22nd in Mary Jones Journal in Robert Manson Myers, *The Children of Pride*, 515. Entry for December 19th in Mary Mallard Journal in Robert Manson Myers, *The Children of Pride*, 512. See also, Clarke, *Dwelling Place*, 433-437.

Mary Jones and Mary Mallard—for all their tears and grief—never faced anything quite as threatening as what happened to Sue. The two Jones’s may have worried about sexual abuse, but so far as we know, nothing like that ever happened. They were never seriously threatened or harmed, sexually or otherwise, even as Sherman’s soldiers arrived once, twice, three, and four times more a day. This discrepancy insofar as who faced which threats exposes something important about the March and the army’s time on the coast. It’s that despite the long history of white women crowing on (*and on*) about Yankee depredations, they were not the ones that saw the worst of the violence. Their race and gender protected them, as did the laws of war, which deemed them non-combatants and therefore off-limits. The same can’t be said for the enslaved—and enslaved women, in particular. If anything, their race and gender made them targets, and as slaves, they were neither soldiers nor civilians, which stripped them of the protections that might have applied to both. All this is to point out that in late December of 1864, two different wars arrived on the Georgia coast, and for all their distress, the Joneses faced one while the enslaved faced another.¹⁷⁸

Zoom out from Montevideo for a moment and the war the enslaved faced comes into better view. It took place all across Liberty County, and happened everywhere—on plantations and roadsides, along rivers and creek beds, out in the marshes and in the piney woods. It wasn’t necessarily different from the war that enslaved people faced in the interior along the March, only exaggerated and more invasive. It was also more material in the sense that unlike in middle Georgia along the black belt, where enslaved people worked cotton and owned less property,

¹⁷⁸ See Lisa Tendrich Frank, *The Civilian War: Confederate Women and Union Soldiers during Sherman’s March to the Sea* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2015); Anne Sarah Rubin, *Through the Heart of Dixie: Sherman’s March in American Memory* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2014); Thavolia Glymph, “Rose’s War and the Gendered Politics of a Slave Insurgency in the Civil War” in *The Journal of the Civil War Era*, Vol. 3 No. 4 (December 2013), 501-532.

enslaved people on the coast planted rice and often owned substantial amounts of property—things like pigs or cows, even horses and wagons. The reason why is that where cotton was worked in gangs, typically from sun-up to sun-down, rice was worked by the task, which meant that the enslaved often had more time to work for themselves and thus more of a chance to raise a little cash and procure a few things of their own. It was all part of an informal economy that was both custom and culture and unique to the lowland, rice growing regions of Georgia and South Carolina.¹⁷⁹

But did Sherman's army care? The short answer is no. After the war's end, enslaved people routinely reported their losses to the Southern Claims Commission, explaining that it was all confiscated by the army. The accounts are staggering. Brister Walthour lost twenty bushels of rice, ten bushels of corn, twenty fowl, two heads of cattle, four fat hogs, and close to one hundred and fifty pounds of pork, totaling what he guessed was two hundred and twenty-five dollars-worth of stock; July Lecounte had a spring carriage and harness stolen from him in addition to a horse, eleven cows, fourteen stock hogs, two meat hogs, fifteen bushels of corn, two bushels of rice, five bushels of peanuts, and some syrup, all told maybe six-hundred and seventy-three dollars-worth of stuff; and Prince Cumming claimed losing thirty-one bushels of rice, three bacon hogs, four hock hogs, four blankets, and a cow, a loss of around two hundred and fifteen dollars. He got a measly ninety-five dollars back—and that was after nearly ten years had passed with no interest applied. For a people who relied on these things to live—and for a people who would later need seed capital like this to eat, barter, plant, grow, and sustain themselves in

¹⁷⁹ On differences between labor systems, see Phillip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Cultures in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1998); Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

freedom—these were significant losses that equated to an upfront tax on their own emancipation.¹⁸⁰

Even so, it was a tax that some seemed willing to pay. The enslaved of Liberty County had been playing the long game. Most knew that the war would result in freedom if the right side won, so they held their tongues and pursed their lips in front of local whites and waited for opportunity to strike. “When I heard that the war was going on I rejoiced in heart at the prospect of freedom. I thought it was too good to come true,” remembered Prince Maxwell, a formerly enslaved person who lost two horses, one being a prized colt, to the army but still supplied the “almost starved” men with a “basket full of provisions”—desiring, he said, to make them as comfortable as he could. Similarly, Abraham Walthour had eighteen hundred dollars-worth of livestock taken from him yet claimed to have cooked for the soldiers, piloted them back across the Ogeechee, and helped them clear the roads. He said he had told all his “colored friends we would be free before the war was over” and that his “word came true.” Prince Stevens told a similar story. Despite having his horse and buggy seized by the army, he waited on the soldiers and later led them to supplies and “gave them any such information as I had in my power,” describing it all as “one grand Jubilee!”¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Testimony of Brister Walthour, December 5, 1877, Claim of Brister Walthour, Liberty County, Georgia, *Southern Claims Commission Approved Claims, 1871-1880: Georgia*. Microfilm Publication M1658, Record Group 217; National Archives at Washington, D.C.; Testimony of July Leconte, December 4, 1876, Claim of July Leconte, Liberty County, Georgia, *Southern Claims Commission Approved Claims, 1871-1880: Georgia*. Microfilm Publication M1658, Record Group 217; National Archives at Washington, D.C.; Testimony of Prince Cumming, December 20, 1875, Claim of Prince Maxwell, Liberty County, Georgia, *Southern Claims Commission Approved Claims, 1871-1880: Georgia*. Microfilm Publication M1658, Record Group 217; National Archives at Washington, D.C. See also, Dylan Pennigroth, “Slavery, Freedom, and Social Claims to Property among African Americans in Liberty County Georgia, 1850-1880” *Journal of American History* 84 (September, 1997), 405-435.

¹⁸¹ Testimony of Prince Maxwell, December 4, 1876, Claim of Prince Maxwell, Liberty County, Georgia, *Southern Claims Commission Approved Claims, 1871-1880: Georgia*. Microfilm Publication M1658, Record Group 217; National Archives at Washington, D.C.; Testimony of Abraham Walthour, Dec. 1874, Claim of Abraham Walthour, Liberty County, Georgia, *Southern Claims Commission Approved Claims, 1871-1880:*

This is how it was in and around Savannah as the army waited to press into the city. The terrain was moving beneath everyone's feet, and in response, enslaved men and women initiated what amounted to a low-grade uprising. Note the term: low-grade uprising. Enslaved people didn't take up arms against their masters. The marshes didn't fill with blood. Heads didn't roll in with the tide. It wasn't an insurrection or a rebellion in the bloody and dramatic way we've come to understand those terms. The situation was too fraught and dangerous for anything like that. But as one enslaved person put it, the war was a sign that "God had commenced his work," and with Sherman stomping through the Low country, the enslaved took the army as a sign to start doing theirs, which is what they did. For all across the region—on plantations, in hamlets, and along the thick, wiregrass paths that connected one with the other—enslaved people responded to the army in ways that bent the war in their favor. The groundswell of history was rising well above the bank.¹⁸²

The situation was a bit different along the rice swamps north of Savannah. Sherman had two divisions with him to the south on the Ogeechee, a position of strength with access to the ocean, while two more angled down toward Savannah from the north and west, with one sloping along the Savannah River. The situation was this: the southern position braced while the northern divisions punched. The camp at Kings Bridge gave the army a sturdy base of operations while the northern advance jabbed into position. As a result, things to the north got a little hairy. These two corps inched in close, which took them within range of Savannah's guns. It was also a slog.

Georgia. Microfilm Publication M1658, Record Group 217; National Archives at Washington, D.C.; Testimony of Prince Stevens, December 4, 1876, Claim of Prince Stevens, Liberty County, Georgia, *Southern Claims Commission Approved Claims, 1871-1880: Georgia*. Microfilm Publication M1658, Record Group 217; National Archives at Washington, D.C.

¹⁸² Testimony of Prince Stewart, Claim of Prince Stewart, Liberty County, Georgia, *Southern Claims Commission Approved Claims, 1871-1880: Georgia*. Microfilm Publication M1658, Record Group 217; National Archives at Washington, D.C.

The reaches of the Savannah River nursed interminable swamps and streams. The roads were bad and still stalked by Confederate cavalry. Moreover, whereas the troops camped out near the Ogeechee received an infusion of fresh supplies because of their proximity to King's Bridge, those trudging through swamps north of Savannah didn't. They were too far away and thus had to keep foraging, except foraging wasn't like it used to be. Food was now much harder to come by, and many of the soldiers believed they would've starved if it hadn't been for the enslaved and their knowledge of rice.¹⁸³

To Sherman's army of corn-fed Midwesterners, rice was like a foreign object. They could find it in abundance, and it sustained them while on the coast; but most had never seen it unhusked, and they didn't know how to handle the mortar and pestle, the two tools needed to hull it. "Not being used to the two devices for separating the two [the rice from the hull] we made slow work at it," reported a Wisconsin man. Col. Oscar Jackson of Ohio reported likewise, writing "the men tried to get something eatable out of the rice...but it was almost impossible to hull." Fortunately for them, the enslaved had an intimate knowledge of rice. The tiny, old-world grain had been a West African import, brought over on some of the earliest slave ships, and enslaved people on the coast of Georgia and South Carolina had been harvesting rice for going on two centuries in some places. It defined how they worked, how they *lived*, and it carried their history, leaving a cultural imprint that gave rise to a plantation world distinct from the rest of the cotton South.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ See Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 413.

¹⁸⁴ Hosea Rood, *Story of the Service of Company E, and of the Twelfth Wisconsin Regiment, Veteran Volunteer Infantry, in the War of the Rebellion* (Milwaukee: Swain and Tate, 1893), 375; Oscar Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary*, 173. On rice, see Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 Through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Knopf, 1974); Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

The soldiers survived on rice partly because enslaved people were willing to share it with them—if sometimes for a small fee. The same Wisconsin man who complained of not knowing how to work the mortar and pestle reported paying the enslaved as much as fifty-cent a quart for them to hull out the rice. Another Indiana man wrote about employing enslaved people to thresh and hull it—and said if he and comrades only had a little salt to season it with they wouldn't have had a reason to complain. In other instances, soldiers learned how to use the mortar and pestle by watching enslaved people and from there went about hulling it themselves. Let's also not be naïve: The way some soldiers described “keeping them [the enslaved] at work” on rice suggests that some form coercion was likely used to get what the soldiers wanted. But even then, the point remains: the soldiers ate because the enslaved sustained them. What's more, rice isn't just a food; it's an entire culture and food-way, which means that in sharing the ways of rice, the enslaved marshalled yet another deep infrastructure of both knowledge and culture in support of Sherman and his men. Once again, slavery's generational history was circling back and shaping its end.¹⁸⁵

Of course, if rice was like a foreign object to the soldiers, the large rice plantations themselves might as well have been foreign countries. It was all strange and new: the sluice gates, canals, ditches, and flooded fields; the standing water and threshing mills; the sunken earth, the Spanish moss, and the wide water oaks; not to mention the infernal sand gnats and those moth-sized mosquitos; or the language—yes, even the *language*. What the soldiers would soon learn is that enslaved people here spoke in a particular patois known as “Gullah”—a creolized, pidgin form of English that grew out of the African majorities of the colonial period

¹⁸⁵ Rood, *Story of the Service of Company E, and of the Twelfth Wisconsin Regiment*, 375; Samuel Merrill, *The Seventieth Indiana Volunteer Infantry*, 219; John Potter, *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, 115-116; John Kinnear, *History of the Eighty-Sixth Regiment, Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 88.

and never abated, even, to some degree, today. More surprising was that there were apparently large numbers of enslaved people that spoke not in just differing dialects, like “Gullah,” but in actual foreign tongues like French or Spanish. “Many of them used the French language and could not understand a word of English,” remembered one soldier, in reference to a group of enslaved people that ran a rice mill for the soldiers. Another remembered happening upon a plantation, where “some five or six score of French or Spanish negroes” had been enslaved. Another even remembered arriving on a plantation inhabited by enslaved people described as being direct from Liberia or New Guinea, two portmanteaus suggesting the enslaved were African, not necessarily African-American.¹⁸⁶

What explains this strange diversity of people and languages? The way-too-simple explanation is that the soldiers got it wrong, that they simply mistook “Gullah” for some language other than English. This might have true in an isolated case or two, but it’s not convincing. The far more plausible explanation strikes at one of the dirtiest secrets of American history—which is that that despite being abolished in 1808, the slave trade never stopped. An illicit international trade continued right up to the eve of the war, with the last known slave ship, *The Clotilda*, docking (and later sinking) in Mobile Bay in 1860. As a system, this illegal trade ran like a well-oiled machine. It was financed in New York, operated out of Brazil or Cuba or West Central Africa, with Portuguese or Brazilian traders typically manning the helm, and it smuggled hundreds-of-thousands of captive Africans—or Afro-Caribbeans—into Southern ports like New Orleans or Savannah. Everyone knew what was going on, but enforcement waned. A whole host of bodies and officials looked the other way as the international traffic in human flesh continued, evidence that, as of 1860, slavery still thrived. It was still a part of a global system,

¹⁸⁶ Samuel Toombs, *Reminiscences of the War* (Orange, NJ: The Journal Office, 1878), 182; Fleharty, *Our Regiment*, 125, Kinnear, *History of the Eighty-Sixth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 88

and it still made fortunes. The question wasn't when it would end; it was what kind of future it could make, reminding us that the moral imperative of emancipation wasn't just about what slavery was but what it could become.¹⁸⁷

One of those Georgia rice barons still making a fortune off slavery—and who likely enslaved several of these foreign-speaking slaves— was a Lowcountry planter named Charles Manigault. Manigault was a member of one of the South's most illustrious families. His Manigault ancestors had been some of the original French Huguenots to arrive not in Charleston but *Charles Town*, back when it was just a colonial venture cut out of the Carolina swamps. His grandfather, Peter Manigault, had at one point in time been the wealthiest man in North America, with most of his wealth coming in land and slaves. Like most of his Manigault forebears, Charles was also a wealthy man. He was a successful merchant, with contacts across the globe, and in 1827, he inherited his first plantation, Silk Hope, in the Berkeley District of Charleston, along with the one hundred and twenty-six enslaved people. A decade later, he expanded his holdings by purchasing two rice plantations, Gowrie and East Hermitage, on Argyle Island, a marshy island in the Savannah upriver from the city, which brought the total number of people he enslaved to about two hundred. His son, Louis Manigault, managed affairs at Gowrie and East Hermitage, and it was Louis who last checked in on the place in December of 1864, just days before Sherman's 20th Corps turned the entire island into its own staging ground for the advance on Savannah.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ See Gerald Horne, *The Deepest South: The United States, Brazil, and the African Slave Trade* (New York: NYU Press, 2007); Ernest Obadele-Starks, *Freebooters and Smugglers: The Foreign Slave Trade in the United States after 1808* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2007); Leonardo Marques, *The United States and the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the Americas, 1776-1876* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); John A. Harris, "Circuits of Wealth, Circuits of Sorrow, Financing the Illegal Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Age of Suppression, 1850-1866" *Journal of Global History* (2016), 409-429.

¹⁸⁸ William Dusinger, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4. Manigault inherited Silk Hope from his father-in-law, Nathaniel Heyward. Heyward was one

And just like that, in a mere matter of days, the Manigault family fiefdom on Argyle Island went up in flames. Sherman's soldiers set fire to and later destroyed "Gowrie Mill, then the Gowrie Dwelling, and lastly the entire Gowrie Settlement," wrote a neighboring overseer, who claimed to have seen it all "with his own eyes." The barn had also been burned, as had the threshing house, which was first looted and stripped of all its contents. Then, in the days after the army left, the whole place flooded. "A large Freshet"—a cascade of water, likely from some destroyed section of a canal—"came down," wrote a J.M. Bandy, the Manigault overseer, and like a busted dam, gushing water swelled over a bank near the house, likely flooding the yard and every everything in it. And that wasn't all. "The Negroes before I left cut the Canal bank at the red trunk to make their escape in a big flat," remembered Bandy. The enslaved had apparently dug out a section of the canal, floated out on to the river, and made their escape. When Bandy wrote back to Charles months later, he explained that they had all left for "Savannah, Hilton Head, or elsewhere."¹⁸⁹

None of this surprised either Charles or Louis. A subtle sense of resignation filled their letters, and unlike the Joneses, who long believed some kind-of paternal kinship existed between them and the people they enslaved, the Manigaults knew otherwise. The war had ruined them of that. "Paid my last visit to the Plantation during the war, and saw my Father's Negroes for the last time," wrote Louis after his last visit in December, seemingly aware that he would never see them again. Charles had the same idea. "I presume the [enslaved] Men are all gone," Charles wrote his son just after Christmas, guessing that if anyone remained it might be the women and

of largest slaveholders in the country. At the time of his death, he owned over seventeen different plantations run by as many as twenty-three hundred enslaved people.

¹⁸⁹ Manigault Plantation Journal, pages 39-40 in in the *Manigault Family Papers* #484, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. See Dussinberre, *Them Dark Days*, 3

only because Sherman's army would have had no use for them. Still, resignation or not, collapses don't come gracefully, and in late December of that year, Charles tried to rationalize his way through things by copying into his journal something a friend had written and later published. It read:

...by the loss of the cause and the institution, I have suffered like the rest, yet I am content; for the conduct of the Negro in the late crisis of our affairs has convinced me that we were all laboring under a delusion. Good masters and bad masters, all alike, shared the same fate—the sea of Revolution confounded good & evil; and in the chaotic turbulence, all suffer in degree.

It goes on:

Born and raised amid the institution, like a great many others, I believed it was necessary to our welfare, if not our very existence. I believed that these people were content, happy and attached to their masters. But events and reflection have caused me to change these opinions; for if they were necessary to our welfare, why were four fifths of the plantations of the Southern states dilapidated caricatures of that elegance and neatness which adorn the county seats of other people? If as a matter of profit, they were so valuable, why was it that nine-tenths of our planters were always in debt and at the mercy of their factors? If they were content, happy and attached to their masters, why did they desert him in the moment of his need and flock to an enemy whom they did not know; and thus left their, perhaps, really good masters whom they did know from infancy? *Good masters, bad masters, born and raised amid the institution*, the passage from Charles's diary reads like weak-kneed *mea culpa*, and perhaps it was. But it was also the kind-of thing someone clings to or says when they know that everything has changed and that there's no going back.¹⁹⁰

Mary Jones, meanwhile, was still holding on. She hadn't left her house except for an hour or two at a time. She'd been barricaded in her upstairs bedroom. Most of their worldly possessions, all their food, and their pride—nearly everything was gone. Their house was in shambles, and though she boasted that none of people she enslaved had left her, that wasn't

¹⁹⁰ Manigault Plantation Journal, pages 38-40 in in the *Manigault Family Papers* #484, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

completely true. A number of enslaved people had left, and even more had likely left from their two other plantations, Maybank and East Hampton. Word had also come in that enslaved people were escaping *in masse* elsewhere in the county, and to her deep dismay, as of early January, the federal army had already begun recruiting freed men from Liberty County into military service. “Clouds and darkness are around about us; the hand of the Almighty is laid in sore judgment upon us; we are a desolated and smitten people,” she wrote, asking—no, *begging*—God for mercy. It didn’t do much good. Soldiers kept on arriving. And even with a faith as steadfast as hers, Mary wasn’t so sanguine. “At present the foundations of our society are broken up,” she wrote, questioning what would become of her and her most God-fearing family in the world that came next.¹⁹¹

Yet where Charles Manigault offered a *mea culpa* to the world, Mary Jones went down teeth clenched, fists tight, and with her matronly heels dug into the South Georgia sand. Despite feeling smitten and judged, as she put it, she continued to think that because some of her slaves never left Montevideo, she could bask in her own vindication, casting blame for her present struggles not on slavery or the war or even her own family’s complicity, but on those good-for-nothing abolitionists, who didn’t understand slavery or the Southern way of life. She also held tight to the blatant white supremacy that comingled so much of her faith and so much of her worldview, writing:

The workings of Providence in reference to the African race are truly wonderful. The scourge falls with particular weight upon them: with their emancipation must come their extermination. All history, from their first existence, proves them incapable of self-government; they perish when brought in conflict with the intellectual superiority of the Caucasian race. Northern philanthropy and cant may rave as much as they please; but *facts* prove that in a state of slavery such as exists in the Southern states have the Negro race increased and thriven.

¹⁹¹ Entry for January 11, 1865 in the Mary Jones Journal in Robert Manson Myers, *The Children of Pride*, 526. See also, Clarke, *Dwelling Place*, 440-442.

The message: old worlds die hard. The war may have killed slavery, but killed and completely dead aren't always the same. Over two hundred years of history was still alive in folks like Mary Jones, and for her and people like her, it would take more than a war to kill the only world she'd ever known. ¹⁹²

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William J. Hardee—a former West Point commandant and author of a popular field manual used to train soldiers in both the Union and Confederate armies—was a smart man. He knew Sherman wasn't laying siege so much as catching his breath; it was only a matter of time, he realized, until all 60,000 of Sherman's men would get out of their half-dug ditches and launch a direct assault he couldn't possibly withstand. Accordingly, Hardee, a native Georgian, did what Confederate armies in Georgia had grown accustomed to doing: he *fled*. On the night of December 20th, right around dark, he marshalled his rag-tag band of 13,000 men, marched them across the Savannah River, burning the bridges behind him, and cut his way north up into the lower belly of South Carolina. It was a quick and slippery movement that saved his army's skin but relinquished the ultimate prize. Savannah—Georgia's colonial birthplace and still the largest city in the state—was now free for the taking, and early the next morning, Sherman's army moved in and let out a sigh of relief. The wait was finally over. The campaign was officially won. ¹⁹³

The city had seen better days. Though some of the soldiers recognized the neatness of its signature parks and squares, its public greenery, and its handsome streets lined with beautiful brick homes, the war had clearly taken its toll. One soldier described the city as a “half-dressed

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ See Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 491-492. See also, Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr., *General William J. Hardee: Old Reliable* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

old maid, whose clothes had been out of fashion and out repair for half a century.” Others noted the apparent destitution of the place: the lack of food, the deserted homes, the people peddling things on the street. More than a few of the soldiers also felt a sense of national *déjà-vu*, for Savannah was, and still *is*, a living testament to the American Revolution. Its squares are so-named Washington, Lafayette, and Liberty. Even the Bostonian Joseph Warren has a square named in his honor. And right in the center of town, the soldiers discovered a tall, near thirty-foot high column with a bronze plaque commemorating general Casimir Pulaski, Savannah’s polish-born revolutionary war hero, who died defending the city from a British attack. The marble and limestone monument with a lady liberty elegantly perched on top commanded the soldiers’ collective attention, acting as a solemn reminder that the heirs of independence were back retracing the steps of history, fighting a war to finish a struggle that the last war left unfinished.¹⁹⁴

The feeling was hard to ignore—in part because Savannah’s African American community wouldn’t let the soldiers see it any other way. Exultations went up and celebrations began almost as soon as the army moved in. “When the morning light of the 22d of December, 1864, broke in upon us, the streets of our city were thronged in every part with the victorious army of liberty...and the cry went around the city from house to house among our race of people, ‘Glory be to God, we are Free!’” recalled James M. Simms, a former slave born in Savannah and once a pastor of the First African Baptist Church of Savannah, historically the first black Baptist congregation in North America. On street corners across the city jubilant people rejoiced. Freed people praised the soldiers, blessed the soldiers, and commented on how the whole army was

¹⁹⁴ Williams, Reuben. *General Reub Williams's Memories of Civil War Times: Personal Reminiscences of Happenings That Took Place from 1861 to the Grand Review* (Westminster, MD: Heritage Books), 2004, 219-220. See also, Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 512.

such a sight to see; they also danced and sang and joined with the soldiers, with notes of “John Brown’s Body” and the “Year of Jubilee” lifted up into the cool, winter air. One soldier remembered an evening celebration at the Second African Baptist where the choir sang in a rapturous chorus:

*Blow ye the trumpet, blow
The gladly solemn sound
Let all the nations know
The Year of Jubilee has come*

Sherman received his share of adulation as well. During the first few days of the occupation, scores of black Savannahians—from formerly enslaved people to members of the city’s free black population—lined up to meet the general and pay their respects, telling him, as one did, “Been praying for you long time, Sir, prayin’ day and night for you, and now, bless god, you is come.”¹⁹⁵

The well-wishers all met Sherman at his new headquarters, the beautiful Green House on Madison Square, a nineteenth century gothic revival mansion built off money made in the cotton trade. It’s proprietor, Charles Green, had been welcoming of the general and his staff, as had most of the city’s white residents. It was a sign not necessarily of amity or goodwill, but instead an effort to prevent what happened in Atlanta from happening in Savannah. The sentiment was one Sherman appreciated, and indeed, he kept destruction at a minimum and was willing to work

¹⁹⁵ James M. Simms, *The First Colored Baptist Church in North America. Constituted at Savannah, Georgia, January 20, A.D. 1788. With Biographical Sketches of the Pastors* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1888), 137; Merrill, *The Seventieth Indiana Volunteers*, 233-235; Quoted in Whittington Johnson, *Black Savannah, 1788-1864* (Fayetteville, Ark: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 173. Quoted in Jaqueline Jones, *Saving Savannah: The City and the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 208. See *Ibid*, 205-209.

with the city's leaders in order to rebuild and make the place functional again. But he wasn't ready to fully oblige them—at least not yet. In his earliest acts as the de-facto head of the city, he requisitioned the last of the cotton, close to twenty-five thousand bales, and all the remaining guns; dismantled the city's defenses; took possession of all the public buildings and warehouses; camped his men throughout the city, turning those neat little squares into army encampments; and later, on the night of December 22nd, he made a public show of the transfer of power, sending a widely publicized letter to Lincoln that read: "I beg to present to you as a Christmas gift the city of Savannah."¹⁹⁶

Over the next several days, the army would move in and make itself at home. Though there was no official word, most all the soldiers knew they would remain in the city at least through the holidays, which buoyed spirits. For the first time in over a month, they didn't have to march anywhere and could rest easy about being shot at or worrying over where their next meal would come from, so they relaxed. The men ate, drank, and paid freed women to wash their clothes. They feasted on fresh oysters sold by street vendors, and when they weren't courting local women or attending church or taking care of official duties, they explored their new winter quarters as wartime tourists, with some taking strolls along the river or visits out to the city's many parks. Unlike in occupations past, the mood remained mostly cordial and calm. The stress of such a large army unloading itself hadn't yet worn the city thin, and local whites were still trying to charm the soldiers into not burning the place down. It wouldn't stay like this for long.

¹⁹⁶ See Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 205-209. See also, Sherman, *Memoirs*, 231.

But for the time being, the soldiers enjoyed a quiet and peaceful end to an otherwise long and violent year.¹⁹⁷

Not so for the freed refugees. Most of the many thousands of freed men and women that had followed the army would never so much as see Savannah. Nor would they ever have a chance to rest or gather themselves before moving again. Just after the fall of Ft. McAllister, while the soldiers were still digging-in and expecting a siege, Sherman issued orders for an army-wide scaling back. He wanted most of the surplus material his men had requisitioned while on the March sent away, and his orders included the freed men and women. “Army commanders will forthwith send to General Easton, chief quartermaster, at King’s Bridge, all negroes, horses, mules, and wagons rendered surplus by our change in operations, or to such points on the Ogeechee River as General Easton may indicate,” the order, dated December 16th, read. The freed people that had attached themselves to the army as cooks, valets, or common laborers would remain in their posts, and these men and women most likely followed the army into Savannah; all the rest were effectively remobilized and forced, likely under arms, over to the Ogeechee, where they would then wait until transports could take them up the coast to Port Royal Island, a small federal outpost on the coast of South Carolina that had been in the army’s hands since November of 1861.¹⁹⁸

Sherman opted for such a forceful and elaborate movement because the post-campaign reports confirmed what he already knew—that the number of freed people attached to the army had grown to an astounding figure. The reports speak for themselves: Alpheus Williams, one of four corps commanders, reported that as many as six to eight thousand refugees followed his

¹⁹⁷ See Payne, *History of the Thirty-Fourth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 178. See also, Trudeau, *Southern Storm*, 512.

¹⁹⁸ “Special Field Orders No. 133” *O.R. Ser. I, Vol. XLIV*, 729-730

army during the March and that as many as twenty-five hundred waited with his columns outside Savannah. Henry Slocum, Williams's superior and the head of the entire left wing, reported an even larger number. He believed as many as fourteen thousand freed people had joined the March, and he guessed that more than half that number arrived in Savannah. Sherman, for his part, believed that the total number of refugees with his army was even larger still. He suggested at one point that no less twenty-thousand freed people followed his columns to the coast, a number which, for context, almost matches the total population of Savannah in 1860 and nearly doubles the pre-war population of Atlanta, which means that a large Southern city gathered at the army's rear.¹⁹⁹

At first, there wasn't any rhyme or reason to where the refugees were. Most arrived on the coast with the columns they had previously been with, though some efforts had been made to congregate the freed people in temporary camps—or *colonies*, to use the language of Sherman's men. One such camp was at the Coleraine Plantation on Argyle Island, a former rice plantation where as many as seventeen hundred refugees worked a rice mill while they waited for the army to move; another was at King's Bridge, where in the ten days between the army's arrival on the Ogeechee and the eventual fall of Savannah close to twelve-hundred freed people pitched camp near the army's temporary headquarters, a place that would remain an active supply depot and a key staging ground for the army's operations. Charles E. Smith of the Thirty-Second Ohio Volunteers was one of seven charged with overseeing the camp. He and his team managed to ration the refugees with a share of the army's supplies, but living conditions remained primitive at best. A "few old tents" and what Smith described as "pole and brush shanties"—otherwise

¹⁹⁹ *O.R. Ser. I, Vol. XLIV, 729-730, 159; O.R. Ser. I, Vol. XLIV, 211; William Sherman letter Salmon Chase, January 11, 1865 in Simpson et. al, eds, Sherman's Civil War, 794.*

known as *lean-to's*— were all that stood between them and the “uncommonly cold” winter weather.²⁰⁰

The unfolding situation at King’s Bridge was a piece of what Sherman could see was a much larger problem. Twelve hundred, after all, is only a sliver of twenty thousand, and that twenty-thousand doesn’t include the enslaved population of Savannah, which was about seven thousand in 1860. It also doesn’t include the large numbers of freed people from outside the city, who in the coming weeks would arrive and turn Savannah into an unsettled hub for displaced people from across the region, further swelling the number of refugees within the army’s orbit. Put simply, the situation, while stable for the moment, was close to snowballing, and Sherman knew it. The army was on the brink of having tens-of thousands of refugees—upwards, perhaps, of twenty-five to thirty-thousand— pressing its camps in need of necessities like food and shelter, a prospect which, try as it might, the army could no longer ignore. It was time to face up to the crisis at hand. But facing up to the problem was only part of it. Even if the army endeavored to do right by the refugees, provisioning that many people presented a basic problem of military supply.²⁰¹

Savannah was also only a temporary resting place. The war hadn’t yet been won, which meant that once a plan was in place the army would be up and on the move. What then? One thing was certain: Sherman wasn’t going to let the refugees follow him any further. He already thought it a minor miracle that they hadn’t impeded the campaign’s progress, and he wasn’t about to keep what he considered a looming albatross tied around the army’s neck. But the

²⁰⁰ On Coleraine, see *O.R.* Ser. I, Vol. XLIV, 729-730, 159. Charles E. Smith et al., *A View from the Ranks: The Civil War Diaries of Charles E. Smith, Citizen Soldier, 32nd O.V.I. Delaware County, Ohio* (Delaware, OH, 1999), 465.

²⁰¹ Leslie M. Harris and Daina Ramey Berry, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014).

situation was also such that he couldn't do what he had done in Memphis or Atlanta—that is, he couldn't just ignore them or send them away. What he needed wasn't a *decision*; he needed a *solution*. Because if a message had emerged from that long march through Georgia, it was that the freed refugees would keep marching. They would keep following the army, and they would endure incredible hardship just to get to where the army was going. Collectively, this overwhelming movement of people had basically made it so that even someone as hard-headed as William Sherman could see that he needed a more permanent place for the refugees—or else he'd find himself right back here again, with thousands of freed people following the army into the next campaign.

As luck would have it, what seemed as good a solution as any sat right up the coast at Port Royal. Located on the Beaufort River, alongside the deepest deep-water port on the southern coastline, Port Royal was the key to an island complex that was both a federal military enclave and an expanding freedman's colony. As of December, 1864, close to fifteen thousand freed people lived on the islands alongside teams of Northern white agents—a motley mix of missionaries, educators, capitalists, and would-be plantation managers. The agents had been on the islands since the Spring of 1862 and had served, in their minds, as vanguards of the revolution. They had built freedmen's schools, organized churches, and administered aid, but—and this is a critical *but*—they had also forced the freed people back into the fields, not as slaves, but as free laborers working for an unspecified wage. The entire project had federal backing via the War Department under the auspices of the “Port Royal Experiment,” and at its head was one General Rufus Saxton, an abolitionist and former quartermaster, who now presided over Port

Royal and the surrounding Sea Islands as the Military Governor of the Department of the South.²⁰²

In all likelihood, Sherman probably made the decision to send the refugees to Port Royal weeks earlier while still on the March. On December 13th, just after arriving on the Ogeechee and in one of his earliest letters announcing his presence on the coast, he wrote General-in-Chief Henry Halleck, telling his old friend “My first duty will be to clear the army of any surplus negros (sic), horses, and mules” and that he supposed General Saxton could help “relieve me of these.” In Sherman’s mind, shipping the freed refugees up the coast to Port Royal was an obvious answer, but it wasn’t the only option on the table. General Grant, it seems, had first wanted the refugees sent all the way to City Point, Virginia, where presumably the freed men would have been put to work on the fortifications around Petersburg. Halleck, though, convinced Grant otherwise. He explained that not only would the refugees struggle through a winter in Virginia, to send them North would “create a panic among them” and potentially staunch the flow of escapees from the interior. “Rebel papers are already harping on this point in order to frighten their slaves,” he wrote after recommending that the refugees be kept with Saxton in the Department of the South.²⁰³

But Saxton—a small, intuitive man with a balding head and schnauzer-like mustache—had serious reservations. As he noted in his end of the year report, the project at Port Royal had swollen in size within the past year. New refugees arriving from elsewhere along the coast had increased the refugee population, putting pressure on the project’s already meager resources. There were also more military personnel operating on the islands, which sparked a basic struggle

²⁰² See Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

²⁰³ *O.R. Ser. I, Vol. XLIV, 701-702; O.R. Ser. I, Vol. XLIV, 840. See also, O.R. Ser. I, Vol. XLIV, 819.*

for space: More officers meant more officer quarters and more troops meant more barracks, leaving a dearth of shelter for the refugees. In response, Saxton wrote Sherman, begging that the refugees might instead be sent to either St. Simons Island, an abandoned island on the Georgia coast, or Edisto Island, a neighboring island just up the coast from Port Royal. “I greatly fear that if these contrabands are sent to this post there will be much suffering among them,” he explained, “as I have neither the men nor the means at my command to provide them with shelter.” “Every cabin and house on these islands are filled to overflowing” he went on, desperately reminding Sherman that he already had “some 15,000” freed people under his command.²⁰⁴

Sherman was sympathetic to Saxton’s pleas, but in the end, little changed. Preparations went ahead as planned. All the boats the navy could muster made their way to the Ogeechee. Refugees serving in the army as either personal servants or military laborers stayed put. All other abled bodied men were given the chance to sign on as laborers—or enlist in the army as members of the United States Colored Troops. All the rest—again, a preponderance of women, children, and the elderly—were subject to Sherman’s orders. They journeyed out toward General Easton, the chief quartermaster stationed on the Ogeechee, and were made to wait—likely in the already established refugee camp at King’s Bridge—until steamers could take them up the coast. This next miniature migration likely began on December 22nd, the day Savannah fell. Sometime that morning, amid jeers hailing them as the “African Brigade” or the “Ethiopian Corps,” the first group of about seven hundred refugees ascended the gangway of an unknown steamer

²⁰⁴ *O.R. Ser. I, Vol. XLIV, 787.*

bound for Port Royal, where the refugee experience of Sherman's March entered its second and, somehow, far more complicated stage.²⁰⁵

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Port Royal's wartime transformation began on November 7, 1861—otherwise known as “the day of the gun-shoot at Bay Point.” On this day, Commodore Samuel Du Pont's federal gunboat the *Wabash*, described as a “prizefighter,” sailed into Port Royal Sound—making a wide turn around Bay Point—and fired heavy rounds at the two Confederate forts sitting on each side of the sound. The assault was a federal success. The forts fell in quick succession, and in response, the remaining Confederate military presence skedaddled—as did most of the region's white inhabitants, which gave the U.S. navy complete control of a large natural harbor on the Atlantic coast and base of operations for future attacks. The operation was an early domino in the War Department's initial strategy for prosecuting the war, a strategy known as the “Anaconda Plan.” From Port Royal, the U.S. Navy could sustain its blockade of both Charleston and Savannah, thus suffocating the Confederate war-effort by stanching the flow of valuable goods and supplies.²⁰⁶

Shortly after the battle, once docked and with everything secure, military personnel were soon shocked to find thousands of enslaved people greeting them onshore. The region's white planters were long gone, the plantations had been evacuated, and enslaved people had been inaugurating the federal occupation by burning cotton and celebrating their sudden change of affairs. For all intents and purposes, the men and women were free; the problem was that the

²⁰⁵ Smith, et al. *A View from the Ranks*, 466.

²⁰⁶ Rufus Saxton, “Reminisces of a Quartermaster,” *The Willard Saxton Papers*, Yale University Library Manuscripts and Archives. See also, Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 11. See also, Stephen R. Wise, Lawrence S. Rowland, with Gerhard Spieler, *The History of Beaufort County, South Carolina: Rebellion, Reconstruction, and Redemption, 1861-1893*, Vol. 2 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 15.

federal government didn't see it that way. Federal emancipation policy at the time still considered them "contrabands of war"—not free men and women, but requisitioned property. Moreover, as many as ten thousand enslaved men and woman called the islands home, which meant that the army now had about ten thousand so-called "contrabands" living within its lines, a number that went far beyond anything the army had experienced up to this point in the war. Such a large number of freed people posed a particular problem for the small force that had taken the islands: Not only would the plantations need provisioning, the last thing the army wanted was to have thousands of freed people pressing in and disrupting its operations, making it evident to most all involved that the situation at Port Royal required a new approach toward dealing with the freed people that sought refuge within federal lines.²⁰⁷

Yet where some within the government might have sensed a problem, Salmon P. Chase, Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury and a brainy, if vain, abolitionist from Ohio, sensed an opportunity. He called on Edward L. Peirce of Boston—a man that had worked among the first so-called "contrabands" at Fortress Monroe in Hampton, Virginia—and sent him south to report on conditions at Port Royal. Peirce spent about three months on the islands—from December of 1861 to February of 1862. When he returned, he handed Chase a report that described conditions but then got down to what Chase really wanted, a plan. Peirce's proposal for Port Royal that went something like this: First, he proposed placing white superintendents in charge of the abandoned plantations. The superintendents would manage the plantations, get the enslaved back to work as paid laborers, and teach them the ways of the wage. The idea was for the plantations to become quasi-training grounds where enslaved people would work as free laborers and

²⁰⁷ Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 16-18. Wise, Rowland, Spieler, *The History of Beaufort County*, 17.

develop the thrift and discipline that Pierce believed was essential in preparing them for the “full privileges” of citizenship.²⁰⁸

On the flip side, Pierce envisioned teams of missionaries traveling to the islands to teach the freed people what the wage couldn't. He imagined regular religious services capable of providing moral instruction and instilling a “religious zeal for faithful labor” and “clean and healthful habits.” He also wanted educators sprinkled in among the missionaries, so that the freed people might enjoy regular classes in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Even further, aid would be administered while freed people adapted to a cash economy, and as important, none of this was imagined as permanent: “As fast as the laborers show themselves fitted for all privileges of citizenship, they should be dismissed from the system and allowed to follow any employment they please...and have the power to acquire the fee simple of land, either with the proceeds of their labor or as a reward of special merit,” Pierce wrote, before saying that “whatever was thought best to be done” needed doing fast. It was the first of the year, and the spring planting season was only a few months away.²⁰⁹

The wage, the market, merit, and the real bedrock of the proposal, “*paternal discipline*,” Pierce's vision for Port Royal was peak nineteenth century liberalism put toward an anti-slavery end. It assumed the all-encompassing power of the market, and it rested on the idea that a healthy wage-system could undo all wrongs and reform society for the better by letting the market allocate to each according to his or her own. By the start of the Civil War, this loose set ideas had become Republican orthodoxy under the banner of “Free Labor” and had become a real weapon

²⁰⁸ Edward L. Pierce, *The Negroes at Port Royal: Report of E.L. Pierce, Government Agent, to the Hon. Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury* (Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1862), 26. See also, Edward L. Pierce, “The Contrabands at Fortress Monroe,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 8 (Nov. 1861), 626-640.

²⁰⁹ Pierce, *The Negroes at Port Royal*, 28.

in the war against slavery. The problem was that as a matter of social policy these ideas proved about as empty and unfit for emancipation as they are for defining freedom in our own time. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. This was still early 1862. At the time, there was no real push for abolition from within the government, so what Pierce proposed was nothing less than an early action plan designed to spearhead a wider, more full-throated embrace of emancipation; or, as W.E.B. Dubois described it decades later, it was a project pointing "out the rough way" to freedom.²¹⁰

It helped that from where Chase sat the plan made perfect sense. The anti-slavery former Governor of Ohio was the Secretary of the Treasury. Any plan he endorsed had to have a financial angle to it, which Peirce's did because it kept Port Royal's plantations in-tact and, in theory, kept cotton production going. The money made from the cotton could then fill the coffers of an already depleted treasury (a major political selling point to skeptics and critics alike) and help fund the war, all while, he believed, inching the country closer to a more general emancipation order. Even better, the underlying rationale for the project laid waste to one of the pillars of pro-slavery thought: If freed people could return cotton to its pre-war yields and provide a financial stimulus to the war effort, it would effectively prove that free labor was just as productive as slave labor and that former slaves would work without the threat of the lash, essentially scuttling one of the South's oldest defenses of slavery. Such an expeditious solution with such far reaching potential was ultimately too good to pass up. In February of 1862, after receiving a lukewarm approval from President Lincoln, the newly christened 'Port Royal

²¹⁰ Ibid.; W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 16. See also, Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*. See also, Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: John's Hopkins Press, 1991).

Experiment' launched into motion. The first wave of Northern agents embarked for the islands later that March.²¹¹

The agents acted as the project's foot-soldiers. Spiteful military personnel already stationed on the islands derisively called them "Gideon's Band"—or "Gideonites"—after the prophet from the Book of Judges. The nickname was one most wore as a badge of honor—reflective of both their collective zeal as well as the presumed divinity of their cause. The first of them all came from either New York or Boston, and they represented a range of interests, occupations, and institutions. "It is a queer farrago we are," wrote the New England educator, William C. Gannett, "clerks, doctors, divinity students; professors and teachers, underground railway agents, and socialists." Pierce bragged that he recruited the "choicest men of New England...men of practical talent and experience," but women were involved as well, with most serving as the teachers or missionaries that would coordinate classes and run the Sunday schools. There was also a sprinkling of young technocrats and aspiring capitalists among the mix—men like Edward Philbrick, a Boston engineer and architect, who would soon become the most polarizing figure on the islands.²¹²

The glue that held the agents together as a collective was their opposition to slavery as well as their reformist spirit. They had all overwhelmingly come from old anti-slavery families with deep roots in Northern reform efforts, and they wanted nothing more than to "plant the Northern pine" in the heart of the slave South. But no amount of zeal or common cause could paper over what were real rivalries and divisions: the New Englanders distrusted the New Yorkers and vice versa; the Unitarians had deep theological differences with the Evangelicals

²¹¹ See Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 20-24. See also, Wise, Rowland, Speirs, *History of Beaufort County*, 72-74.

²¹² Quotes from Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, pgs. 43, 45. See also, Wise, Rowland, Speirs, *History of Beaufort County*, 73-74.

(which is to say nothing of their differences in temperament); and most of all, those that saw the project's primary mission as providing humanitarian relief ran up against those more interested in nurturing the profit motive—in turning the islands into little free labor laboratories where formerly enslaved people remained in the fields working as wage laborers. This last division—aide and instruction versus labor and production—plagued the project from the start, and over time, it would peel everything back to the base-line paradox that underwrote the entire venture: How could a project meant to lift people out of bondage do so while still essentially keeping the plantation system intact?²¹³

The truth is Port Royal *was* its contradictions. On the one hand, the more social and humanitarian aspects of the project went swimmingly. The white agents retained a kind-of paternal lordship over island affairs, which was always a source of tension, but in certain matters, freed families bought what the agents were selling. Religion, for instance, bonded them. The Northern agents never understood the intense emotion freed people put into their worship, and the priggish, rather square New Englanders especially disdained how freed people would sing and dance their way through a service. But despite these differences, the holy word became the project's common ground. Church services happened regularly and were often so well attended that crowds spilled out into the church yards, with services sometimes happening out underneath moss-covered trees. And though they had no real legal authority to do so, the northern agents extended the work of the church by performing marriage ceremonies, consecrating unions that

²¹³ Quoted from Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 334. On divisions, see also Wise, Rowland, Speirs, *History of Beaufort County*, 75.

had previously been illegal or unrecognized with celebrations and drawn-up marriage certificates.²¹⁴

Schools were another early success. A nearly instantaneous bond formed between the many white educators on the islands and the former slaves. Two teachers, Edward Hale and William C. Gannett, described the alphabet as a kind of “talisman” and wrote that after having been forbidden from knowing how to read or write (made illegal by an 1834 amendment to the South Carolina Slave Code) freed people desired the “power of letters” with what seemed like an insatiable thirst, which, by demand, spawned a wide-ranging educational program: Teachers held Sabbath schools, essentially Sunday schools, that promoted literacy by way of religious study; they held mixed classes that instructed adults and children at the same time; they held night classes two and three times a week; and some teachers held individualized lessons from the comfort of their homes. Most of the formal classes in the early years were held in the Old Brick Church on St. Helena’s Island, which was always too small for the number of pupils, until 1864, when the Pennsylvania Freedman’s Relief Commission sent down building materials for an institution known as “The Penn School,” one of the first free-standing Freedmen’s schools in the country.²¹⁵

Port Royal was also where the United States Colored Troops got its start. In May of 1862, General David Hunter, then stationed at Port Royal as head of the Department of the South, went

²¹⁴ See Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 89.

²¹⁵ [William C. Gannett and E.E. Hale] “Education of the Freedmen,” *The North American Review* 101, no. 209 (October 1865): 533. The authors of this article are unknown, though John R. Rachel suggests that it was co-written by Gannett and Hale. See also, John R. Rachal, “Gideonites and Freedmen: Adult Literacy Education at Port Royal, 1862-1865,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 55, No. 4 (1986): 453-469. See also, Orville Vernon Burton Lucious Cross, *Penn Center: A History Preserved* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014).

rogue. He began enlisting freed men into army regiments and later issued his own general emancipation order, declaring slaves in Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida—the three states under his command—“forever free.” It was a bold stroke that shocked his commander-in-chief. Hunter had acted without Lincoln’s knowledge and without Lincoln’s approval, which drew a swift rebuke from a president whose administration remained intent on keeping the slaveholding border states in the Union. Lincoln rescinded the emancipation order but otherwise looked the other way as Hunter’s regiments kept drilling into the late summer of 1862, just when Lincoln and the War Department were rethinking their stance on black enlistment. Most of the enlisted men later formed the First South Carolina Volunteers, one of the first U.S.C.T. regiments raised from the South and one of the first to see action, having launched successful raids on the Georgia coast in November of 1862, over a month before the Emancipation Proclamation went into full effect.²¹⁶

The “Port Royal Experiment,” in other words, sat at the tip of the spear. It was one of the key points at which the social revolution of the Civil War began to turn and one of the early points at which the profound transformations of the war began to take hold. In that sense, Chase and Pierce were basically right, or at least half-right: once emancipation was broached and let out at Port Royal, there was no bottling it back up again. The changes would only accelerate, not slow down, and as a prime example of what was possible, Port Royal sat like a large chestnut lodged in the government’s throat. Its very existence forced Lincoln, his party, and the War Department to take stock of what was happening and forced the government into seeing the emancipation as a natural outcome of the war, which helped prepare the way for a full evolution

²¹⁶ See Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 144-151; Wise, Rowland, Speirs, *History of Beaufort County*, 109-113. Stephen Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments that Changed the Course of the Civil War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

from a limited, restrained war to a war that would destroy slavery. So, if Chase, Peirce, and the Gideonites prided themselves as being at the forefront of an evolving revolution, it's because they were. For all its inherent limitations, the project at Port Royal helped open doors that the enslaved had been kicking in.

Yet on the other, more opposing hand, Port Royal could never escape its contradictions. They were built into the fabric of the plan, and nowhere was its contradictions more evident than when it came to labor. The crux of the matter was that freed people saw wage work as little more than a modified form of slavery. Not only were wages sometimes withheld, delayed, or lower than promised, the Northern agents initially insisted that the freed people work in gangs and on time-scales similar to those employed by plantation overseers; some superintendents were also not opposed to using corporal punishment, even whippings, or other penalties as a way of imposing regimented work routines. This was never how freed people imagined freedom. Freedom meant working on their own time and in smaller, self-determined units, and freed people largely rejected cotton (which had nothing but market value) in favor of subsistence items like corn and sweet potatoes, foods that filled gardens and family tables. Freed husbands also didn't want their wives and mothers to have to work in the fields; they wanted them, instead, to be wives and mothers and take on the responsibilities that they felt befitted them and their family. And freed people certainly never agreed to old plantation punishments. Those days were done.²¹⁷

This resistance on the part of freed people represented a wholesale rejection of the market logic the project had been built on. Freedom was way more robust and meaningful than the narrow freedom to work for a wage—a belief that ran afoul of the white superintendents and

²¹⁷ See Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

threatened to undo the project's governing rationale. As result, labor became a festering source of discordant expectations, particularly in those early days. Laura Towne, a white teacher from Philadelphia, once wrote of a "little rebellion" breaking out on account of a man refusing to work his time picking cotton. She also recalled a time when a freed man interrupted a sermon, shouting angrily that "The Yankees preach nothing but cotton, cotton!" The situation remained tense until superintendents worked out key concessions. Some plantations, for instance, dispensed with the gang-system in favor of family tasks, and most all the superintendents recalibrated their thinking around punishment, with whippings receiving an island-wide prohibition. But even with these concessions, the basic structure of the plantation system remained in place, causing disputes like these to persist in varying degrees through the end of the war and into Reconstruction.²¹⁸

Land was another issue that exposed the emptiness of the economic vision attached to the project. All along many of the missionaries and teachers—the most devoted of the all the agents—believed the old plantations would eventually be broken into plots and turned over to freed families. And that's certainly what most freed families expected as well. They wanted their own homesteads and the independence that came with owning a headright of land. Some superintendents believed, however, that turning the land over was too much like a handout—that for freed people to make it in freedom, they needed to buy the land and engage in the market economy just like everyone else. Anything less, they argued, would essentially send the wrong message about freedom and set freed people up a harsh transition into the free labor economy. Complicating matters even further was that in the rush to abandon the islands and secede from

²¹⁸ Laura M. Towne, Rupert Sargent Holland, ed. *The Letters and Diary of Laura Towne: Written from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862-1884* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1912,) 20, 9. See also, Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction*.

the Union, the original plantation owners stopped paying their federal taxes. Accordingly, most of the land in use at Port Royal had been foreclosed on by the U.S. government and, by law, required selling at public auction, which meant that as of March, 1863, all the land under the project's feet risked being privatized and thrown to the wind. The rug risked coming up no more than two years in.²¹⁹

Momentum shifted a bit when Rufus Saxton assumed command. By late 1862, a simmering squabble between the Gideonites on one side and a mix of military officials and treasury agents on the other reached a boiling point. An army colonel had gone as far as socking Edward L. Pierce in the face, which was apparently the last straw. Peirce left the islands shortly thereafter, knowing that his presence was now a distraction, and the powers-that-be decided to better protect the project by vesting it within the War Department and appointing a military man as its head. They settled on Rufus Saxton, who turned out to be the right man for the job. For Saxton was a child of New England reform. His parents had been Garrisonian abolitionists. His father, in particular, was an early feminist and transcendentalist lecturer, who dreamed of having his son live in a utopian socialist community known as Brook Farm. Rufus, instead, went to West Point while his brother Willard, his eventual aide at Port Royal, went to Brook Farm, but the elder Saxton never strayed from the ideals of his youth. He spoke the Gideonites' language and shared their sense of mission but added a degree of level-headedness gained from a career in the military. Not only that, he was honest, earnest, and in the three years he spent at Port

²¹⁹ See Akiko Ochiai, "The Port Royal Experiment Revisited: Northern Visions of Reconstruction and the Land Question," *The New England Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (2001): 94–95.

Royal he won the trust of the freed people by proving himself time and again as a faithful friend and advocate.²²⁰

Saxton's arrival fortified the project by giving it military backing, but as of early 1863, the land sales still loomed. Desperation set in. All the northern agents could see that if nothing was done to stem the tide, they'd be back boarding north-bound ships in no time. Indeed, everyone would have been on those ships if it wasn't for Laura Towne, the white teacher from Philadelphia. Her idea was to basically throw the army's weight around by getting either Saxton or David Hunter to declare the islands essential for military operations and therefore off limits. She wanted to effectively nationalize the islands for the project's sake—and it worked. She floated the idea to Saxton one night over dinner, who then took the idea to Hunter, who then halted the sales on account of military necessity. The move wasn't a long-term answer, but it mucked up the works just long enough for Republicans in Congress—many of whom had come to support the venture—to amend the tax law and settle on a compromise: The sales would go on, but a large portion of the land would be set aside and reserved for federal use, which constricted the project but didn't kill it. It wasn't the out-and-out mandate many had wanted, but most of the agents celebrated the fact that crisis had been averted and the Port Royal Experiment was still on.²²¹

The emphasis here is on *most* of the agents. A ring of superintendents led by Edward Philbrick, the Boston technocrat, and other middle-manager, industrialist-types (all but one from Boston) had come to see privatizing the land as the most resourceful solution to the project's problems. Private ownership, they believed, would not only make for a more successful system,

²²⁰ See Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 152-153.

²²¹ See Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction*, 40-41; Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 212. See also, Akiko Ochiai, "The Port Royal Experiment Revisited: Northern Visions of Reconstruction and the Land Question," 94-95.

producing better yields and better profits, it would solve the ongoing problem of not having any cash for wages or supplies by letting private owners pay and provision freed people directly rather than wait for federal funds. And, as important, if all the privatizing was done by people already associated with the project—ie. *themselves*—there would be a near seamless transition, giving the project the long-term stability it always lacked. Many among the privatizing wing of the group also thought that working for a private employer would do the freed people some good. It would teach them how to be good employees, as if that's all freed people would ever be, and give them a supposed guardian to look out for their interest, or so they argued. Philbrick, in particular, believed it was best for he and his peers to hold onto the land, as *trustees* essentially, and sell it back to the freed people once they had proven themselves “fit” for freedom and could afford to buy it.

When the dust settled and all the sales had been finalized, the March 1863 land sales took Port Royal's divisions and turned them into a wide, nearly unnavigable chasm. Rufus Saxton retained the land set aside for the project, which turned out to be over three quarters of all the land up for auction, more than what many had expected. Some freed families, meanwhile, managed to pool their money and buy smaller plots outright. All the rest went to private buyers, most of whom had no affiliation with the project at Port Royal, though there was one that did. Edward Philbrick and his newly formed joint stock company wound up as the largest single landholder on the islands. He walked away with eleven plantations, some 8,000 acres, and close to a third of St. Helena Island, one of the largest islands within the project's bounds. Nearly a thousand freed people lived on lands he controlled. For a roughly a dollar per acre and a bargain price of seven thousand dollars in all, he basically bought his own empire and, in the process, split the ‘The Port Royal Experiment’ down its seams. He became a lightning-rod character

among the Gideonites, with some supporting and some hating him, and his landholdings fragmented the project's perceived sense of unity, turning a collective endeavor into a private enterprise.²²²

The answer from the agents not under Philbrick's sway was to double-down. These were already lukewarm apostles of Philbrick's doctrinaire approach to free labor anyway, so with Philbrick's influence now concentrated on his own private affairs, the various Northern agents retreated from the more commercial aspects of the project and refocused around their social agenda. "God's programme," reiterated the Reverend Mansfield French, a native New Yorker and one of the project's founders, "involves freedom in its largest sense—Free soil, free schools,—free ballot boxes, free representation in state and national" government. French's was an expansive vision shared by many of the missionaries. But the keen-thinking Saxton knew that the project was on borrowed time. The land sales had proven that the assumed end-goal of redistributing land to freed families was far from certain, and so over the next year or so, Saxton shifted the project's focus to a policy known as preemption. The idea was that the Northern agents would help freed families raise money and preempt the purchase of homesteads before the land could be auctioned off again. It didn't work. Despite having some assurances from people in power, there was a second land auction in the spring of 1864, which ended much as the first one had, setting a somber, dispiriting tone for what would be a long year of stalled dreams and dashed hopes.²²³

²²² Akiko Ochiai, "The Port Royal Experiment Revisited: Northern Visions of Reconstruction and the Land Question," 99-100.

²²³ Quoted in Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 218. See also, Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction*, 41-42 and Akiko Ochiai, "The Port Royal Experiment Revisited: Northern Visions of Reconstruction and the Land Question," 99-100. Ochiai points out that preemption, as a policy, had its roots in the Western settlement of the Homestead Act of 1862. At the time, some members of congress were working to extend the provisions of the bill to include all abandoned land in the South.

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Willard Saxton—the younger of the two Saxton’s at Port Royal— could hear the guns firing in the distance. It was December of 1864. Sherman’s army was amassing around Savannah, and every so often the low, rumbling sounds of war made their way over to the South Carolina Sea Islands. Willard—who was neither a Northern agent nor a soldier, but rather his older brother’s aide and personal secretary—didn’t seem to notice all that much. He kept up his normal routines: work when his brother needed him; pleasant walks when the weather suited; backgammon with friends; and evening hours spent reading aloud with his family. He was also a bit pre-occupied: A close friend and colleague of his had fallen ill. Saxton and other aides had been sitting bedside with him for weeks now, and in the days between the fall of Ft. McAllister and the surrender of Savannah, the man took a turn for the worst. He was unstable, unconscious, and sometime during the day on the 17th, he suffered what Saxton described as a “spasm” and died. On top of that, Willard, the much, more idealistic of the two Saxton brothers, was himself feeling feverish, which wasn’t unusual. He had suffered bouts of fever and ague on and off the past year and was starting to feel sick again when news came that Sherman had taken Savannah.²²⁴

Sherman’s arrival on the Georgia coast capped off what had been a difficult year. The ‘Port Royal Experiment’ was still in business but was in the midst of a yearlong crises in confidence. Morale had sunk—which says a lot considering the unbound optimism of the Gideonites—and disenchantment had started to set in. Even worse, the Gideonites began losing the trust of the freed men and women. The confidence that had been accrued over the last two years went out with the land sales of ’64. Protests became more frequent. Freed people

²²⁴ Entry for December, 17th. Willard Saxton Diary. Willard Saxton Papers. Yale University Library Manuscripts and Archives.

demanded to know why the sales ended as they did and why foreign white northerners suddenly had a right to lands that they still claimed as their own. Some refused to work for new employers, which reopened old wounds regarding labor and land that had been patched up and managed over the past two years, which in turn led to more work interruptions, growing independence on the part of freed laborers, and a general disinterestedness in working in the Port Royal system. Freed people had also grown to resent some of the army's heavy-handed recruiting practices, and it didn't help those freed men that did enlist faced a torrent of abuse from fellow white soldiers and all for unequal pay.²²⁵

Rufus Saxton knew enough to know that he was overseeing a project on the wane. The land sales had crippled his authority, tied his hands, and spread deep mistrust through every nook and cranny on the islands. But he also knew that all was not lost. As he saw things, it all came down to land. Helping freed families secure homesteads, he knew, would do more in terms of paving a way for freedom than all of the work in the past two years combined, and as important, land seemed to him what the freed people wanted and deserved. He wrote frequently that freed people had already paid for the land through their many years of "unrequited toil," and he believed that the best way to lift them out of slavery was to start by repaying the debt that was owed. The issue was that with preemption going down in such a spectacular defeat (the auction literally happened out under a shade tree in front of a public audience, where freed people and agents alike watched as home places and family burial grounds got carved up and parceled out to the highest bidder) he was down to the only hand he had left to play and that was to start lobbying.

²²⁵ Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 296. See also, Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction*, 59-60.

For the better part of 1864, Saxton beat the drum of black homesteading, becoming perhaps the single most influential white champion of black landowning in the history of the war. He told anyone who would listen that the surest way to success at Port Royal was to have freed families settled on land that they could live and work on as theirs. It was the subtext of all his reports and all his relevant letters. Preemption may have failed as a policy, but he kept the spirit of preemption alive by chastising his superiors for the disastrous and unjust way the land sales went down. In one long and biting report from early March, he voiced his frustrations and those of the freed people, writing that “after abandonment and forfeiture of their former possessors” it seemed to him that “the right of the slaves to the land could not be justly denied.” “They had been the only cultivators, their labor had given it all its value, [and] the elements of its fertility were the sweat and blood of the negro so long poured out upon it that it [the land] might be taken as composed of his own substance,” he wrote on, concluding that the whole island complex around Port Royal might well be considered a “foreclosed mortgage for generations of unpaid wages.”²²⁶

It didn't end there. Saxton's increasingly public position on the land issue opened up a quasi-cold war between he and Edward Philbrick that had been a long time coming. Saxton was strait-laced and genial, and he was careful not to impugn Philbrick's character, telling the newly minted member of the planter class that he didn't doubt his sincerity or personal integrity. But he didn't hold back either. In a long and tersely worded letter written after the two men published contradictory and combative accounts in separate newspapers, he told Philbrick: “The immediate possession of the land without purchase is the indefeasible right of the negro, and I am not able

²²⁶ Saxton Letter from March 15, 1864, pg. 168 in the Rufus Saxton Letter book. Willard Saxton Papers. Yale University Library Manuscripts and Archives.

to perceive the pertinence of calling that act of justice “petting” him, than I am the propriety of calling the act of withholding it from him a fraud and a wrong.” “Neither do I believe,” he maintained, “that a ‘purely commercial basis’ is the proper starting for an enterprise designed...for the benefit & elevation of the negro,” something Philbrick had apparently once said. But alas, Saxton reiterated that he was uninterested in settling old scores and only wanted to set the record straight.²²⁷

Except the gloves had already come off, Saxton had worked himself into a lather, and in the course of this long letter those old scores came up again and again and again. Saxton, for starters, gained rhetorical steam when he stood by his charge that Philbrick envisioned freed people as forming “an agricultural peasantry” and criticized the young New Englander for scrimping on the time he allowed freed people to work for themselves. He then hit Philbrick where it hurt the most by eviscerating his position on the land sales. Note the passive-aggression embedded in the well-placed quotation marks:

...it is stated as something that “remains to be proved,” whether the giving of the land to the negroes—which you call “special privileges to them to the exclusion of whites”—is “best for the future of the community.” This again you characterize as “petting” the negro, and relieving him of a portion of his responsibility.

To which Saxton continued:

There is far more danger in being unjust to the negro, than of petting him—whatever that may mean. I suppose it did not properly and logically come within the purview of an enterprise founded on a purely commercial basis to consider the antecedent claims and paramount rights of the negro to the soil, and the very slight claim which any white man can make to any portion of it.

Saxton then rolled up his sleeves and said the quiet part out loud. This “market value” that Philbrick spoke so longingly about was not only meaningless and completely irrelevant to the project at hand, it depended on landlords like Philbrick reducing freed people to a permanent

²²⁷ Saxton Letter to Philbrick. June 15, 1864 in the Rufus Saxton Letter book. Willard Saxton Papers. Yale University Library Manuscripts and Archives.

class of peasant-like laborers. “With a market condition and the price competition of capitalists depending upon negro labor for the working of the lands,” he wrote, “the negroes chances [to own land] will be reduced to a minimum, and land will be attainable by but a very small number.” Preemption, he later claimed, wasn’t a perfect policy, but what it got right and what Philbrick got wrong was that it recognized the “principle of justice” and charted a path for its future fulfillment—an understanding that Saxton believed could have been the basis for a successful project.²²⁸

But that, sadly, is not what happened. Instead, as Saxton hammered home at length while drawing his letter to a close, Philbrick strong-armed his way into taking the project down a different path, and Saxton didn’t let him forget it. He was now cordial and respectful, saying that he didn’t doubt Philbrick’s personal honor, but he still sniped back, writing:

What protection do you propose for the negro against white men of another character and unhonorable purposes? What chance has he to get land out of the clutches of the human vulture, who care for him only as they can gorge themselves upon his flesh? If you had seen the hungry swarms gathered here at the land sales in February, I think your views concerning the exclusion of whites would be somewhat modified. The white man has made the negro what he is. The experience at [Port Royal] and elsewhere is far from demonstrating that white men indiscriminately are waiting to do him justice, and may be safely permitted to govern his affairs. What you call 'special privileges to the negroes to the exclusion of whites,' seems to me to be vital to the safety and hope of advancement of the negro—the plainest justice and the wisest policy.

And with that, Saxton signed off, perhaps not quite realizing that the issues he had just pointed to would soon balloon out from Port Royal and become the defining issues of the war and its aftermath.²²⁹

This cold war between Saxton and Philbrick lingered on throughout the year. The two put on a friendly face. They spoke, they wrote each other, and they still saw themselves as being on

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

the same team so to speak. But the fault lines had been clearly drawn, recognized, and respected. It also didn't help their relationship none that the land issue never went away. It remained the central, looming question on the islands, and it became more and more of an issue the more people could begin to see an end to the war in sight. Yet while the land question hung over island affairs like a far-off, out-of-reach horizon, there were other important issues that needed dealing with. Labor remained a constant headache. Saxton didn't believe in the superintendent system as a long-term solution, as evident in his debates with Philbrick, but he also knew that without a preemption policy and with venal private buyers looking to buy their way into the islands, it was best to salvage what he could from the current system. Speculators and treasury agents hassled him at times about instituting work-houses in order to tighten the work regime; he always said no. He also took practical steps aimed at building trust with the freed people by shielding them from abuse.²³⁰

Ironically, the issue that would almost come back to cost him his job was one of these issues relating to abuse, and it is even more ironic that it had less to do with land or labor and more to do with the army and its recruiting tactics. Early complaints from freed people concerning recruiting originated back in Hunter's raising of the First South Carolina Volunteers, and they had grown louder and more frequent in the years since. Varying forms of impressment went on, which sometimes sparked combative outburst between freed people and recruiting agents. Even worse from Saxton's perspective was that the persistence of the army's recruiting efforts placed freed people in a tight spot. If freed men joined the army they did so at the expense of their families, who they had to support; and if freed men joined the army they practically forfeited their potential wages earned from working the land, which sent all sorts of mixed

²³⁰ See Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 296. See also, Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction*, 59-60.

messages about the primacy of free labor and tied the logics of the Port Royal Experiment in all sorts of knots. Saxton saw the situation as untenable in the long run, and over the course of 1864 and beyond, he became a real check on the army's recruiting. It was an issue he would eventually resign over, though he would ultimately withdraw his resignation letter once certain changes were made.

Nevertheless, as of Christmas, 1864, Saxton was still in charge of Port Royal and overseeing a season unlike any other on the islands. The army had increased its personnel. There were now more soldiers on the islands than ever before. Plus, Sherman's movements kept everyone in a state of suspense: Where would he go next? Would his army sweep through Port Royal, and if so, what did that mean for operations there? Christmas also coincided with a start to disease season. The winter before had been particular severe. Anecdotal reports indicate that short-lived smallpox epidemic might have broken out on the islands, and though it was too soon to tell if the disease had returned, sickness had already gotten to Willard. On Christmas Eve, the younger Saxton brother complained of feeling the sickest he'd felt in years, and he spent much of Christmas day in and out of bed while his brother was away meeting with Sherman in Savannah. Rufus returned a few days later after the holiday had passed, though Willard tells us that his older brother was displeased with the overall message he received. Apparently, the "heads of that army" told Rufus that they didn't "care that much about humanitarian labor" and were "content to leave the more important and perplexing work to others"—those 'others' being a euphemism for *him*.²³¹

What Willard didn't quite yet realize as he spoke to his brother late in December was that the work was already under way. As he was getting in and out of his sickbed on Christmas and

²³¹ Entries of December, 24, 25, and 30. Willard Saxton Diary. Willard Saxton Papers. Yale University Library Manuscripts and Archives.

tying on the new necktie he got as a gift from his family, the first of the many thousands of refugees from Georgia were on their way to Port Royal. They had been forced over to the camp at King's Bridge, boarded on to steamers, and sent down the winding routes of the Ogeechee River. They may have stopped downstream at Fort McAllister, which was now operating as another federal depot; but in all likelihood the first voyage probably steamed right past the old Confederate fort out into the mouth of Ossabaw Sound, where it hit the Atlantic Ocean and then turned north, making the wide swing around Tybee, Daufuskie, and Hilton Head before turning into Port Royal Sound. From there, the steamers likely veered to the right, sailed past the docks at Port Royal, and landed just up river at Beaufort, where Rufus Saxton had his headquarters. The first seven hundred or so arrived on Christmas; more arrived after that; and by the end of January, just over a month after the first transports began, as many as seventeen thousand freed refugees from Georgia would find themselves trying to start a new life on the Sea Islands of South Carolina.

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Fortunately for Willard, he felt better by New Year's—just in time for the planned festivities. It was not only a new year, it was now two years to the date from the first of January, 1863, the day the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect. The islanders celebrated two years ago with an Emancipation Day ceremony full of speakers, hymns, and public readings. The whole affair was fast becoming a New Year's tradition. This year's celebration happened on 2nd of January, not the 1st (New Year's fell on a Sunday), but the spirit was the same. The clear Low Country morning began with a long procession of freed men and women led by a military band, and in between a carriage team pulled a cart carrying a design of a "Goddess of Liberty" that had been built and placed inside. The parade went on through the morning and ended at the local

library, where three to four thousand people crowding around listening to the slate of speeches and singing patriotic songs. The very next day, later in the evening, well after things had died down, a second procession took place. A segment of Sherman's right wing—some sixteen to eighteen thousand soldiers—marched straight through town and right into their winter camp, another clear indication that this little island experiment was on its way to becoming the center of something huge.²³²

Chapter 5

The Savannah Winter

²³² Entries from January 2-3. Willard Saxton Diary. Willard Saxton Papers. Yale University Library Manuscripts and Archives.

In the evening hours of January 12th, 1865, Garrison Frazier, a formerly enslaved person and a retired pastor, ascended the spiral stairs of the beautiful Green Mansion, Sherman’s new Savannah headquarters. As he entered the master bedroom—which Sherman had converted into a working office space—the room drew tight and warm. Nineteen of his peers—leading African American ministers from churches across the city—gathered around him as their chosen spokesperson. Some of the men probably sat while others stood and lined the walls. Meanwhile, Sherman and the bespectacled Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War, who had arrived in the city days earlier, took their place at a small table in the center of the room, clearly helming affairs. A fire lit the mantle. The room’s sleek wood furnishings glimmered against the gaslight, and a quiet hush filled the air as the mood turned from kind and genial to stiff and formal. There was important business to discuss, and for the next hour or more, Frazier would hold court with two of the most powerful men in the country, sharing all he knew about slavery, the war, and how he imagined freedom.²³³

What Frazier had to say that night has since been etched into history. Ostensibly, the meeting concerned “matters relating to the freedmen of the State of Georgia.” Everyone in the room knew, however, that the real subject was the growing refugee crisis in and around the city.

²³³ See “Minutes of An Interview Between the Colored Minsters and Church Officers at Savannah with the Secretary of War and Major-Gen. Sherman,” in Berlin, Fields, et. al. eds., *Free At Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* (Edison, N.J.: The Blue and Gray Press, 1997), 310-313. For accounts of the meeting, see Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 218-219; Jonathan M. Bryant, “‘We Defy You!’ Politics and Violence in Reconstruction Savannah” in Leslie M. Harris and Daina Ramey Berry, eds. *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 160. See also, Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 70. See also, James M. Simms, *The First Colored Baptist Church in North America. Constituted in Savannah, Georgia, January 20, A.D. 1788. With Biographical Sketches of the Pastors* (Philadelphia: J.D. Lippincott, 1888), 128.

That was the reason everyone was there. But as soon as Stanton called the room to order, the meeting evolved into something more. It became a reckoning—not just over the present situation in Savannah, but over *slavery* and *freedom*, the two ideas at the heart of our history and the two ideas that explain just what this brutal war was about. Indeed, like Lincoln’s Second Inaugural or the Gettysburg Address, Frazier’s words resonate all these years later because in a sharp back and forth with Stanton, he managed to crystalize the war’s meaning and purpose while also imagining what might lie ahead. And unlike Lincoln, our American martyr, who spent his life free to reap his own rewards, Frazier spoke with the clarity and insight of a man who had to buy his own freedom.²³⁴

Yet despite the authority in Frazier’s voice, despite his almost singular ability to stare back into the eyes of Sherman or Stanton and answer their questions with expert skill and precision, he was still acting as a spokesman. He spoke for himself, of course, but he also spoke on behalf of his peers and on behalf of the thousands of men and women that followed the army to Savannah and were now footsore and weary and camped throughout the city. His opinions were partly theirs. He had formed them, he implied, in his talks with the refugees in the course of his personal ministry—which is to say that as he sat in that warm room in the Green Mansion, the refugees were with him. They spoke through him as their messenger and mouthpiece. In that sense, all those extraordinary scenes from the March—the miles traveled barefoot and on horseback, the plantations fled and deserted, the immeasurable heartbreak of Ebenezer Creek, and the underlying force of thousands of freed people all pushing the army toward Savannah—culminated in this one peaceful evening in the corner bedroom of one of Savannah’s most lavish

²³⁴ Ibid.

homes. Despite not having a seat at the table, the “Sherman refugees” were finally having their say.

The meeting at the Green Mansion—sometimes known as the “Savannah Colloquy”—changed everything. Four days later, on January 16th, Sherman issued orders outlining a land plan designed to settle freed people from Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida—known in military lingo as the ‘Department of the South’—on confiscated plantations located along the coast. This was big news. On the surface, it seemed as if the U.S. government was authorizing the confiscation of Confederate property and redistributing it to freed families along with some start-up material needed to take it and make something of it. That was the dream at least, and no one wasted any time trying to bring it to fruition. After a long war where peace and freedom were hard to find, freed people were beginning to see an end. They were beginning to imagine new lives in freedom, and Sherman’s order represented an important step forward. It was as if the possibility of a wider, more meaningful Reconstruction had suddenly been uncorked and let loose, and once again, it was the very presence of the refugees that forced the army’s hand. Of the March’s many legacies, this is one of the most important, even if it’s also perhaps the least understood.

At the same time, the situation was never quite that straightforward. Cynicism abounded and could be found on all sides. Sherman certainly never saw his plan as anything more than a useful expedient. Neither did a number of Savannah’s free Black leaders or their anti-slavery allies. Nor for that matter did many of the freed refugees. While some recognized the far-reaching potential of the land plan and celebrated it as an answered prayer, many others approached it with ambivalence, if not outright skepticism. The reason is that those on the ground knew the orders came amid the chaos of an unfolding crisis: The camp at King’s Bridge

still housed hungry people who lived and slept in the open air with little to curb the cold or rain, and steamships still carried shiploads of refugees out into the open ocean and up to Port Royal. The refugee crisis of Sherman's March was not only unresolved, it was still evolving, which weighed the moment's optimism against a more complicated reality.

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As late December, 1864, passed into a new and hopefully better year, Savannah was a city with a buzz. Thousands of blue-coated soldiers quite literally crammed into the streets. Enlisted men lived within Savannah's picturesque squares. Public parks housed tightly packed tent cities. Campfires, cigar smoke, and the sounds of carousing soldiers gleamed into the night. Elsewhere, military bands played at what seemed like all hours of the day; random processions started and ended and often for what seemed like no reason at all. Once proud homes took on boarders. Residents everywhere peddled what they could: corn, liquor, sex, oysters by the pail. And after four long years, the federal blockade was over; the river was in the process of being cleared of its obstructions, which meant that steamships would soon ply the river before docking among the quays and wharves along Savannah's once bustling waterfront. The city was coming back to life.

Savannah was also witnessing a transformation. Slavery was dying, if not already dead. Freed people rejoiced, soldiers styled themselves as liberators, and everywhere Savannah's old social fabric was coming completely undone. Freed washerwomen simply stopped working, sometimes leaving water in the tub and clothes out on the line. Freed laborers now demanded a wage and sought to reclaim lost property. Others taunted their old masters and mistresses by noting just how drastically the tables had turned: One woman laughingly told her old mistress

that the Rebels had all gone to Hell now that Sherman was here; another man laughed at the fact that where his white master used to not “git a glass o’ water for he’self,” he now had to go out and work the pump. Savannah’s rigid racial system was leveling right in front of everyone’s eyes. “It is a dream, sir—a dream!,” one freed woman—a servant at the Pulaski House Hotel—said of freedom, telling a war correspondent that it was almost as if she didn’t know where she was.²³⁵

For the city’s white slaveholders, the changes hit hard and fast. Like the slaveholder who now had to pump his own water, nothing said that the old antebellum world had collapsed with greater certainty than the indignity of white masters doing basic tasks on their own. In one instance, George Ward Nichols, Sherman’s writerly adjutant, met one of Savannah’s most aristocratic ladies in an utter state of distress. “It is terrible, sir!,” she told him, saying that her slaves had all left, that her family’s plantation had been “broken up,” and that she feared she might actually have to find work. Her pleasant summer vacations north and her \$20,000 dollar-a-year income Nichols sarcastically noted “had all been swept away in a single blow.” When the woman then told him that she thought she may have to “submit to the disgrace of giving lessons in music” just to get by, Nichols stopped and with real contempt, replied simply, “Madam, I hope so.”²³⁶

The exchange was one that could have been a stand-in for many. “Society in the South, and especially in Savannah, had undergone a great change,” wrote Charles Carleton Coffin, the

²³⁵ See Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 213; Frances Thomas Howard, *In and Out of the Lines: An Accurate Account of Incidents During the Occupation of Savannah by Federal Troops in 1864-1865* (New York: New York Public Library, 1905), 204; Quoted in William A. Byrne, “‘Uncle Billy’ Sherman Comes to Town: The Free Winter of Black Savannah,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (Spring 1995), 91-116; Charles Coffin, *The Boys of ‘61 or Four Years of Fighting: Personal Observation within the Army and Navy* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1885), 416.

²³⁶ See Nichols, *The Story of the Great March*, 107.

war correspondent, in one of his histories of the war. Coffin—perhaps the most prolific newspaper reporter to cover the war—also sensed just how tumultuous these changes were, writing that Sherman’s arrival was like “a convulsion, an upheaval, a shaking up and settling down” and that the great Western army marched through the city “like a moral earthquake, overturning aristocratic pride, privilege, and power.” While hindsight tells us that Coffin might have peddled in hyperbole, the evidence was hard to ignore: old colonial homes had been deserted and emptied, influential families sat penniless, and masters and former slaves now found themselves in a reappraised relationship. “A reversal of the poles of the earth would hardly have produced a greater physical convulsion than this sudden and unexpected change in the social condition of the people of this city,” Coffin wrote as he reflected on his month-or-so reporting from Savannah.²³⁷

Perhaps the surest sign of the tremendous changes sweeping through the city came in the early morning of January 10th. Right around breakfast, as the Georgia sun was still rising overhead, close to five hundred Black school children emptied out of the First African Baptist Church on the west side of Franklin Square. The boys and girls of varying ages and sizes crossed over Montgomery Street, where they entered Savannah’s city market along West St. Julian, and then ascended the stairway up to the old Bryan Slave Mart, Savannah’s premier establishment for the buying and selling of human beings. It was now a school. In just a few short weeks, Savannah’s African American leadership had taken over the building, hired teachers, and turned the old auction room into a school house. Shackles and iron bars still clung to the walls, the auction block was now a glorified lectern, and the teachers taught reading and arithmetic as the

²³⁷ Coffin, *Four Years of Fighting*, 429-430.

children sang and learned their letters. A new Savannah was being built right out of the remnants of the old.²³⁸

One of the primary groups that went to work building this new Savannah was an organization known as the Savannah Education Association, otherwise known as the S.E.A. Formed just days after the city fell into federal hands and manned mostly by the city's African American ministers (many of whom would later sit alongside Garrison Frazier during the meeting at Sherman's headquarters), the S.E.A. had one express goal and that was to fund, build, organize, and staff as many freedmen's schools as possible. They found prospective buildings, hired teachers, and worked alongside other groups administering supplies. The classroom in the Bryan Slave Mart was perhaps the S.E.A.'s most symbolically important school; and, indeed, the neat procession of school children up to the old slave pen was meant as just that, a symbolic changing of the guard. But the new school in the old auction house was just one of many S.E.A. funded institutions sprinkled throughout the city, nearly all of which quickly filled to capacity and expanded.²³⁹

The Savannah Education Association was also prime example of something that was already a political reality. Across the city Savannah's Black ministers were acting as community leaders: When the city needed schools, they went out and converted a slave mart into a school room. When Savannah's Black community needed a place to celebrate, a place to sing, dance, and collectively exult in the idea of freedom, they opened church doors, picked up hymnals, and led the choir. When Sherman and Stanton sent for a leadership class, folks who could assess the situation and speak on behalf of the community as a whole, they became emissaries and envoys,

²³⁸ See Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 213.

²³⁹ See Jonathan M. Bryant, "'We Defy You!' Politics and Violence in Reconstruction Savannah" in Harris, Berry, eds. *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, 162-168.

a diplomatic quorum that went toe-to-toe with the U.S. government while representing the interests of those they served. And in the coming years, when freed men obtained the right to vote and the country became a bi-racial democracy for the first time in its history, many of those same ministers would once again rise to the occasion, becoming some of Black Savannah's first elected leaders.²⁴⁰

As of early January, however, even as the S.E.A. got off the ground and schools began popping up all over the city, the pastorate's most urgent work pertained to the freed refugees and Savannah's status as an unsettled hub for refugees from across the region. Despite Sherman's elaborate scheme to ship refugees up the coast to Port Royal, the unfolding refugee crises was still a long way from being solved. Hundreds, if not thousands, of freed people still waited outside the city for ships to take them up the coast; many had lost patience and had begun to press into the city, where they joined the soldiers in sleeping on the streets in makeshift camps and tent cities. On top of that, an influx of refugees from the city's immediate outskirts had also begun to make their way into Savannah, and a still separate flow of refugees moved in from points further south—namely, the vast plantation regions along the Georgia coast. The result was a city unsettled and a little on edge: Refugees pressed in from all angles, and without adequate food, water, or shelter, they all faced the threat of a long and hungry winter of likely immense hardship.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ On Savannah's Black ministers, see Edmund L. Drago, *Black Politicians and Reconstruction in Georgia: A Splendid Failure* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1992). See also, John W. Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto: The Making of the Black Community in Savannah, Georgia, 1865-1880," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 6 No. 4 (Summer 1973), 463-488.

²⁴¹ See Jonathan M. Bryant, "'We Defy You!' Politics and Violence in Reconstruction Savannah" in Harris, Berry, eds. *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, 158-161; Byrne, "'Uncle Billy' Sherman Comes to Town," 108-109.

This influx of refugees was yet another situation in which the city's black churches stepped up to the plate. There isn't a great deal of surviving evidence available, but judging from what we have, it seems the churches leapt into action. Relief for the city and the refugees became an extension of the ministry, and it was church leaders, members, and mutual aid groups—most of which likely had roots in the church—that ensured that aid for the refugees became a primary concern. It couldn't have come a moment too soon. Not only was the health and well-being of the refugees a worry, the city was starting to feel the strain of its congested streets. Typhoid and other diseases ravaged the camps. Pack animals lay dead and strewn all over. Garbage filled the streets, and in late January, a stray fire from a former Confederate armaments building tore through town, destroying close to a hundred and fifty homes. This once pleasant city of refined taste and urban planning was quickly becoming what one observer described as a “miserable hole.”²⁴²

There was, however, a well-intentioned rival that challenged ministers' authority. The American Missionary Association—known as the A.M.A.—was the grandfather of American relief efforts. Originally dedicated to building anti-slavery churches and proselytizing to the nation's poor and downtrodden, including the enslaved, the A.M.A shifted to more relief-oriented works as the war began. It was in federally occupied Virginia in 1861 building camps and schools for freed people. It had been major supporter of the Port Royal Experiment, with many of its members signing up as agents and teachers. It had also been a prodigious fundraiser, with most of its money going toward building freedmen's schools, hiring teachers, and providing relief in the form of necessities like food, blankets, medicine, and other supplies. By the end of

²⁴² See Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 214-215; Quoted in Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 215.

the war, the A.M.A. would have outposts and representatives stretching from New Orleans to Memphis, Nashville to Atlanta, Chattanooga to East Texas; basically, wherever the army had a significant presence and thus probably a large camp of freed people within its lines, the A.M.A. wasn't far behind.²⁴³

Representatives of the A.M.A. began arriving in Savannah by the middle of January. But by then they were already late. The S.E.A. and the city's churches had stepped into the void and were busy building schools and administering relief. The leading Black ministers didn't necessarily need the A.M.A.'s help—apart, maybe, from its money. Nor did they necessarily need or want the A.M.A. dictating the religious agenda. Many of those same ministers had just begun disassociating their churches from their predominantly white parent churches. Most of the Savannah churches were also either Baptist or Methodist, where the A.M.A. had a decidedly Congregational or even Quaker coloring. Thus a slight rivalry emerged. The city's Black ministers had the foothold and clout that the A.M.A. wanted and felt they deserved; the ministers, in turn, had no interest in relinquishing their leadership or their autonomy. For the most part, both sides managed to put differences aside and quell this soft rivalry, but over time, the A.M.A. would exert its money and influence and often in ways that cut into the authority of church leadership.²⁴⁴

Another much more menacing threat loomed in form of sectional reconciliation. On one hand, this was partly Sherman's doing. While it's true that he requisitioned all the cotton, destroyed Confederate war materiel, and forced the city to put up with housing all his men, he

²⁴³ See Joe Martin Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1986). See also, Lewis Tappan, *History of the American Missionary Association: Its Constitution and Principles, Etc.* (New York, 1855).

²⁴⁴ See Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 218; See also Jonathan M. Bryant, "'We Defy You!' Politics and Violence in Reconstruction Savannah" in Harris, Berry, eds. *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, 162-168.

also wanted Savannah stable and in good working order. And while he didn't just lay down and hand the city back over Southern whites, his Field Order No. 143, issued the day after Christmas, 1864, practically did just that: It ordered that "the Mayor and City Council of Savannah *will* continue to exercise their function (italics added)." The idea was to keep this possible tinder box of a city high and dry and away from any unnecessary explosives (in fact, the order stated explicitly that the mayor and city council was to keep the fire department in operation), but what it effectively did was ice freed black leaders out of the decision-making process. The people that had been most loyal and supportive of the army, the people out there caring for the refugees, and the people leading Savannah's freed population into the post-war period saw the levers of city government return to the old masters in name of political continuity—a decision that knee-capped not just the tremendous changes happening within the city, but also the potential for more.²⁴⁵

On the other hand, part of this general spirit of reconciliation had to do with the perceived 'Unionism' of white Savannah. The city's mayor, Richard Arnold, surrendered the city warmly; Charles Green, proprietor of the Green Mansion, invited Sherman into his home as an honored guest. These weren't anomalies. Throughout the occupation, Savannah lived up to its now popular reputation as the "Hostess City of the South," a revelation that lulled the soldiers into a false sense of surrender. "There is more Unionism in Savannah, than in any place we have been yet," observed George Bradley, the chaplain from Wisconsin, noting that the "people seem to be glad that we have come." Coffin, the war correspondent, agreed, writing that he saw far less "sourness" here than in either Memphis or Louisville, two places that became occupied earlier in

²⁴⁵ See Jonathan M. Bryant, "'We Defy You!' Politics and Violence in Reconstruction Savannah" in Harris, Berry, eds. *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, 161. See Sherman, *Memoirs*, Vol II, (New York: Appleton, 1875), 233.

the war. George Ward Nichols noted much of the same, suggesting that “While I have no doubt that most of these people actually sympathize with their relatives and friends in the Rebel army, I am equally sure that they rejoiced that the city was in our hands and under the government of the old Union.”²⁴⁶

The truth was probably somewhere in between. Despite the army’s relatively warm welcome, as Bradley noted, much of this supposed “Unionism” stemmed from the simple calculation “that so long as the rebels held this city, trade would remain dead.” The federal blockade would remain in place, locking down any and all traffic out of Savannah’s port. Others, like Richard Arnold, the Mayor, invariably acquiesced to Sherman out of fears the general might pulverize the city into a pile of rubble, which is why Arnold and several others reportedly wrote to Hardee begging him to evacuate rather than defend the city. The fiery inferno of what *was* Atlanta hung in everyone’s mind. There was also a sinking reality setting in among many that this was the end of the line, that after four years of fighting, after four years of a debilitating blockade, and after a year in which losses seemed to pile up and defeat seemed more and more inevitable, it was best to get out while the getting was good and while suitable terms were still on the table. In other words, what Sherman and the northern soldiers took for surrender or submission or even *Unionism*, white Savannahians recognized quite clearly as their own self-interest.²⁴⁷

It wasn’t just Sherman or the soldiers, either. The idea that Savannah was primed and ready for a return to normalcy spread throughout the nation’s newspapers and all the well-heeled

²⁴⁶ Bradley, *The Star Corps*, 244; Coffin, *Four Years of Fighting*, 406; Nichols, *The Story of the Great March*, 107. See also, James David Griffin, *Savannah, Georgia During the Civil War* (University of Georgia, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1963).

²⁴⁷ Bradley, *The Star Corps*, 244. See also, Griffin, *Savannah, Georgia During the Civil War*, 279.

parlor rooms of the Northern elite. War-weary readers wanted to believe it and convinced themselves it was true. Thus the seemingly inexplicable: In early January, Sherman and Richard Arnold, the Mayor, organized a relief commission designed to procure vast sums of northern relief—which in an early act of reunion, the commission most generously received. Northern relief organizations located primarily in New York, Boston, or Philadelphia raised enough money to send down three full steamers loaded with goods and supplies. One of the ships, the *Daniel Webster*, couldn't even fit everything on board and had to leave a substantial amount of cargo behind. The dark waters of sectional reconciliation stirred already. Though the idea was for the aid to go to poor and suffering of Savannah regardless of race and though some tonnage was meant for the refugees, it didn't quite work that way. When asked about the food and supplies by Charles Coffin, the freed woman from the Pulaski House Hotel complained, telling him bluntly, "Not a mouthful I've had."²⁴⁸

For these reasons, Savannah in the winter of 1865 sat at on a razor's edge. The social revolution of the war was already underway. The city was experiencing tremendous change, and the old Antebellum order of things had started turning in on itself, giving way to a new spirit of possibility among not just city's free people of color, but the many thousands of refugees who now joined them. But while the city was certainly spinning, it hadn't yet turned. Underlying headwinds from unlikely sources beat back against the changes, which slowed the city's transformation, muddied the waters, and for the moment at least, narrowed the scope of the politically possible. Which way would things ultimately turn? That was the question in early January, and as the month wore on, the city—indeed, the entire nation—received an answer in

²⁴⁸ See John P. Dyer, *Northern Relief for Savannah During Sherman's Occupation*, *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Nov. 1953), 457-472. See Coffin, *Four Years of Fighting*, 417. See also, Byrne, "'Uncle Billy' Sherman Comes to Town," 110.

one of the most radical and transformative measures in American history, though reality was never quite as it seemed.

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It started with a pleasant stroll around the city. On January 11th, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, and a gaggle of administrators arrived in Savannah on board a repurposed revenue-cutter. Once settled and after having ditched his staff, Stanton joined Sherman on a tour of Savannah. Over several days, they strode the streets. They visited the sections of town where the soldiers pitched their tents and made their camp. Stanton—a Pennsylvania Democrat with a long and graying beard, round glasses, and an eye for good civil procedure—found them surprisingly neat and impressive. He was particularly amazed at how some soldiers managed to jerry-rig supplies and scrap parts for use as household accommodations. But Sherman also sensed that Stanton’s talk of tents and troops served as small talk meant to mask his primary concern: “He [Stanton] talked to me a great deal about the negroes,” Sherman remembered, likely with a sigh or even a scowl.²⁴⁹

It was the start of an ongoing inquisition. At one point, Stanton point-blank asked Sherman about his subordinate, Jeff C. Davis, and pulled out a newspaper article alleging crimes along Ebenezer Creek. In response, Sherman skated around the issue and then played everything down. He assured Stanton that Davis was an “excellent soldier” and that he didn’t believe Davis had “any hostility to the negro.” He then told Stanton much of what had been reported were only rumors; he then sent for Jeff C. Davis to let him speak for himself, which seemed to satisfy Stanton for the time being. Still, in bringing up the freed refugees and asking about Ebenezer Creek, Stanton had clearly touched a nerve. Sherman grouched about it in his memoirs years later.

²⁴⁹ Sherman, *Memoirs*, Vol II, (New York: Appleton, 1875), 243-244.

He went out of his way to defend what happened, suggesting that any general in Davis's position would have done the same. He then turned against Stanton, writing with a soft, subtle snarl that whereas most everyone in the army felt a sympathy for the freed people, it was a form of sympathy different from that of Stanton, whose feelings he said was "not of pure humanity, but of *politics*."²⁵⁰

In truth, Sherman probably saw everything coming. Back on January 1st, Sherman's old friend Henry Halleck, stationed in D.C. as the army's Chief-of-Staff, gave his fellow West Point graduate an important heads-up. "While almost everyone is praising your great march through Georgia and the capture of Savannah, there is a certain class," he wrote, "who are decidedly disposed to make a point against you...in regard to the 'Inevitable Sambo.'" According to Halleck, rumors in D.C. held that Sherman "manifested an almost criminal dislike of the negro" and instead of complying with the government's orders on emancipation, repulsed freed people from his lines "with contempt." This whisper campaign also alleged that the army could have brought close to fifty thousand freed people with it to Savannah, "thus stripping Georgia of that many laborers and opening a door by which many more could have escaped from their masters," but that instead "you [Sherman] drove them from your ranks, prevented them from following you by cutting the bridges in your rear, and thus caused the massacre of large numbers by Wheeler's cavalry."²⁵¹

Halleck assured Sherman that the accusations would soon pass "as the idle winds" and that people understood the position he was in, but the situation was serious enough for him to restate the case. He wrote:

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Halleck Letter to Sherman, Dec. 30, 1864 in *O.R.* Ser. 1 Vol. 44, 836-87.

Some here think that, in view of the scarcity of labor in the South, and the probability that a part, at least, of the able-bodied slaves will be called into the military service of the rebels, it is of the greatest importance to open outlets by which the slaves can escape into our lines, and, they say, that the route you have passed over should be made the route of escape and Savannah the great place of refuge. These I know are the views of some of the leading men in the administration, and they now express dissatisfaction that you did not carry them out in your great raid.

Stanton then nudged his friend along by asking the important questions: Was it not possible to re-open these lines of escape, especially now that there were no more fears about supplies? Could escaped slaves find at least partial refuge on the abandoned rice plantations around Savannah? What about the cotton and rice plantations on islands along the coast? Halleck closed by ensuring the general that whatever course he chose would get government approval and that such a course “will do much to silence your opponents.” In effect, Halleck was telling his dear friend to wisen-up and face the facts—that the March was over and, politically speaking, he needed to protect his flanks.²⁵²

Halleck wasn't wrong. From his perch in D.C., he had heard the whispers and read the newspapers. Word had had gotten out. Soldiers must have written home to their families, their congressmen, or to local journalists because stories of Ebenezer Creek started appearing in some of the nation's most prominent newspapers. The government had caught wind of things as well, which is why Stanton was down there asking questions. Ironically enough, no one had a good story to tell. What actually happened at Ebenezer Creek and who was to blame differed from one story to the next; if anything close to the truth got told, it was always told a bit slant. But then again, in a situation like this, the truth didn't matter all that much. The word was out, the news was spreading, and a troubling narrative was on the rise: Primarily, that Sherman and the army had acted maliciously toward the freed people, that they shirked their responsibility in avoiding

²⁵² Ibid.

emancipation, and that because of the army, disaster struck along some dark stream known as Ebenezer Creek.

But Sherman had his defenders. Later that spring, after Wendell Phillips, a vaunted New England abolitionist, attacked Sherman for the incident at Ebenezer Creek, a staff officer quickly wrote *The Liberator*, a Phillips friendly paper, and demanded that they retract their pre-printing of Phillips's claims. "General Sherman was miles away from the scene of the occurrence, and sincerely deprecated it," the man wrote. Moreover, he said that Sherman had always acted with the utmost respect to the freed people and that they all looked upon him as a deliverer. He went on to announce that he made this statement out of respect to "a great general and brave man" and that Phillips "should be the first to honor a man who by his great military success has given freedom to have a million slaves," which suggests the man knew exactly what was at stake: The army was on trial, and to defend Sherman's personal integrity was to defend the integrity of the March.²⁵³

This was the battle that played out in the press throughout the winter and early spring. Sherman had his defenders, but the stories didn't stop. "There is one incident, the blackest of the war..." went one account clipped from *The New York Tribune* and republished in *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*. It described how freed people all throughout the March had been the soldier's friends and allies and suggested that the refugees following the army looked more problematic than it actually was. Yet none of that seemed to matter to one Jeff C. Davis. The report confirmed the first incident at Buckhead Creek—how Davis destroyed the bridge and forced the refugees into the water. Then it confirmed the "more revolting" incident days later at Ebenezer Creek:

²⁵³ "General Sherman and the Georgia Slaves," *The Liberator* (Boston, Mass.) March 3, 1865.

Near this bridge Davis placed two of his staff officers, who, as the column passed, stopped them and put the poor wretches ashore on a sort of island. The rebel cavalry followed close behind, and when it had entered the causeway there was no escape for any one to the rear. As soon as our troops had crossed the stream, Davis had the bridge taken up. The negroes were thus actually penned and delivered to the rebels, not simply driven out to shift for themselves, as they might have been in the open country. It is said the rebel force, being balked in their pursuit of us, fired upon these helpless women and children. The number thus driven back and left to rebel butchery was about 300.

The Standard included an editorial note at the bottom of the report saying that it almost decided not to run the story due to rumors that such reports had been discredited. But then it justified its decision to run the story on the grounds that those rumors either defended Sherman or the army and never actually contradicted what happened. They were, in a sense, non-denial denials. The note said it also couldn't deny the fact that there were more stories coming in and nearly all of them spoke to the "inhumanity" of the man who was quickly becoming the undisputed villain of the march.²⁵⁴

So, *The Standard* ran the story. And to better protect itself from charges of libel, it included another, more conclusive report clipped from a Philadelphia newspaper. It reasoned thusly: "This massacre has not yet received denial; but, whether it is true or not that hundreds of these negroes were slaughtered because Gen. Davis deliberately cut them off from all escape, it seems nevertheless true that he abandoned them." It went on to call Davis's order "both inhuman and unmilitary, the issue of a brutal impulse, and a symptom of the grossest bad generalship," suggesting that letting the refugees cross the bridge was the least the soldiers could do. Then it offered this: "Every corps commander found himself crowded by refugees, and Howard [leading Sherman's right-wing], brave and gentle soldier as he is, crossed sixteen bridges (rebuilt as fast as the rebels destroyed them) without sacrificing any poor fugitive in his train." To put it plainly,

²⁵⁴ "Reported Cruelty to the Negroes by Sherman's Army," *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* (New York, New York) Jan. 28, 1865.

there was simply no excuse. Whatever happened at Ebenezer Creek could have clearly been avoided had Jeff C. Davis wanted to avoid it. That alone, the paper implied, was damning enough.²⁵⁵

Other reports followed a similar pattern. Most tended to deflect blame away from Sherman while indicting Davis, a move that kept responsibility isolated and on a single rogue actor instead the army as a whole or its venerated leader. But even with all his apparent villainy, Davis had his defenders too. “On several occasions on the march from Atlanta we had been compelled to drive thousands of colored people back, not from lack of sympathy with them, but simply as a matter of safety to our army,” wrote Henry Slocum, Davis’s immediate superior. Henry Hitchcock wrote similarly. “His [Davis’s] first duty was to see [to the safety] of his own corps, and whatever that duty reasonably required he was bound to do, regardless of any *incidental consequences* (italics added),” he wrote, which was his way of saying that along the March military necessity reigned supreme and was all generals like Davis were responsible for. It was also a clear example of something else, of an army starting to circle its wagons in order to protect one of its own.²⁵⁶

No one closed ranks quite as hard or as fast Sherman himself. For example, around the time that Stanton landed in Savannah, Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase wrote to Sherman about what the general described as the “Negro question.” In response, Sherman offered a full-throated defense of himself and all his men. He assured Chase that he meant “no unkindness toward the negro” and that everything he did was out of necessity. “If you can understand the nature of a

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Quoted in Hughes, Gilbert, *Jeff Davis in Blue*, 312; Hitchcock apparently said this in a long letter to noted military theorist and scholar, Francis Lieber. See Hughes, Gilbert, *Jeff Davis in Blue*, 211.

military column in an enemys (sic) country, with its long train of wagons you will see at once that a crowd of negroes, men women children, old & young, are a dangerous impediment,” he told the old Ohio abolitionist, saying that a similar number of white refugees would have been a problem just the same. He went on to reiterate his best line of defense, boasting that he and his army had led “hundreds of thousands” to “freedom & asylum” and that the “negro constituents of Georgia would resent the idea” of him being “inimical to them.” “They regard me as a second Moses or Aaron,” he proudly told the esteemed member of the Lincoln cabinet, as if that alone closed the case.²⁵⁷

No matter what was said or done, Sherman never understood the criticism. In his mind, he was a general, not a politician. His object was to win the war as fast and with as little risk as possible, and as odious or as unpopular as it was, such a result necessitated that his lines remained free of refugees. He also felt that he had been respectful to the freed people he met along the way—and indeed, their support for him was unequivocal. Even further, he believed he had acted in the freed refugees’ best interest by discouraging them from following along and enduring what was sure to be a long and fretful march. And he felt that sending the refugees to Port Royal was the best-case scenario for both them and the army, viewing the islands a place where they could find safety and security away from the ravages of the war. But most important of all, Sherman proudly considered himself and all his men liberators. Never mind his personal views or past comments, his March through Georgia freed more enslaved people than any other moment in American history and did so at a great risk to he and his men. Why couldn’t anyone see that?

²⁵⁷ Sherman Letter to Salmon P. Chase, Jan. 11, 1865 in Berlin, Simpson, eds. *Sherman’s Civil War*, 794-795.

Mostly because Sherman didn't do himself any favors. His past clung to him. He also never moderated. Nor did he ever relent. When it came to something like Ebenezer Creek, there was no remorse and no apologies. Also, it didn't help matters none that as the news of Ebenezer Creek spread from paper to paper, he embroiled himself in controversy by continuing to block the recruitment of black troops. Now, Sherman always maintained that freed men could enlist if they wanted and that the real story was those "avaricious recruiting agents from New England" impressing men into service. But it is also true that Sherman and his staff still preferred that freed men join the army as laborers or pioneers and not as soldiers, saying to Chase: "If the president prefers to minister to the one idea of negro Equality [ie. Black soldiering], rather than military success...he should remove me, for I am so constituted that I cannot honestly sacrifice the safety and Success of my army to any minor cause." Or, as he relayed to his wife, "I want soldiers made of the best bone and muscle in the land, and I won't attempt military feats with doubtful materials." To him, there was simply no use in discussing it. "I am right," he told her, "and won't change."²⁵⁸

The irony is that Sherman had indeed changed and had actually changed quite a bit. He had evolved his thinking on these issues from where he was earlier in the war, and he would continue evolving through the war's end and into its aftermath. For instance, where Sherman once didn't see slavery as the central object of the war or even an issue worth fighting for, he slowly came to see its primary importance and insisted that so far as he was concerned, slavery was dead. The war had killed it. He never wavered on that. And where he once recoiled at the idea that freed people would have a place in a post-war America, he now saw that as inevitable—though he firmly believed that was an issue best left to politicians like his brother, not to fighting

²⁵⁸ Ibid.; Sherman Letter to Ellen, Jan. 15, 1865 in Howe, ed. *Home Letters of General Sherman*, 328

men like himself. And while he didn't believe in universal suffrage and typically erred on the side of pacifying Southern whites at the expense of supporting freed people, he eventually came to accept freed people having the right to vote. So, yes, Sherman *had* changed and *would* change, just never as *much* or as *fast* as others wanted him to, ourselves included. As he would later tell Stanton, he was "unable to offer a complete solution" to what he thought of as the "negro question," but even if he was, he preferred leaving "it to the *slower operations of time* (italics added)."259

Indeed, if any one trait defined Sherman, it was that he was immensely stubborn. Even worse, when backed into a corner, he compounded his stubbornness by always doubling down. Hence, his eventual reply to Halleck's letter from January 1st. Upon learning that "a certain class" of men had been whispering about his conduct in D.C., he unloaded: "But the nigger? Why, in God's name, can't sensible men let him alone?" "If it be insisted that I shall so conduct my operations that the negro alone is consulted, of course I will be defeated, and then where will Sambo be?" he wrote on, before repeating himself once more: "Don't (sic) military success imply the safety of Sambo and *vice versa*?" He then turned to what he called that "cock-and-bull story" of Ebenezer Creek, saying "I didn't turn anyone back." Jeff C. Davis did prohibit some freed people from following him, he was willing to admit, but he insisted that Davis didn't block anyone at Ebenezer Creek on purpose. Instead, Sherman claimed that Davis simply wanted to preserve his bridge and pulled it up to do so, a story that contradicts reports that Davis's men actually burned the bridge for good measure. He then informed Halleck that both Davis and

²⁵⁹ See O.R. Ser. 1 Vol. 47. Pt. 2, 87.

Slocum didn't believe Wheeler's men actually killed anyone in the melee, which was all he needed to hear.²⁶⁰

After writing in rage for a moment, Sherman then sobered himself and became somewhat existential. He spoke to Halleck not just about the rumors or what happened along the March, but about his stance on emancipation in general. As always, he stressed restraint and sought to avoid responsibility. "I know the fact that all natural emotions swing as the pendulum," he wrote, warning that Southerners had pulled slavery's "pendulum so far over that the danger is that it will on its return jump off its pivot." He repeated: "The South deserves all she has got for her injustice to the negro but that is no reason why we should go to the other extreme." He then offered to Halleck the most precise summation of how he saw his role in enacting military emancipation: "I do and will do the best I can for the negroes, and feel sure the problem is solving itself slowly and naturally...but, not being dependent on votes, I can afford to act, as far as my influence goes, as a flywheel instead of a mainspring," as something, in other words, that transfers motion instead of propelling it directly. In all aspects of life and certainly on the battlefield, he was a mainspring, but on this one all-important issue, transferring motion was as far as he'd ever go.²⁶¹

Yet the story of the March is that while Sherman may have seen himself as a flywheel and nothing more, history intervened. Tens-of-thousands of freed people ran to his army, followed his army, and in due course, turned his March through Georgia into one of liberation, placing him and his campaign right in the center of America's most revolutionary moment. Even more, the ground hadn't yet stopped shaking and the March's enormous impact hadn't yet

²⁶⁰ Sherman Letter to Halleck, Jan. 12, 1865 in Berlin, Simpson, eds., *Sherman's Civil War*, 795-796.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

straightened itself out when Stanton arrived in Savannah and started asking questions, which meant Sherman had to start coming up with answers—or at least pacify the Secretary into ending the inquiry. Thus, when Stanton asked for a conference with a group of local Black leaders, Sherman could only comply. He opened his headquarters, prepped his staff, and sent the invitations. He was confident that the freed people of Georgia considered him a great friend and deliverer, yet he must have also entered the evening knowing he was walking into his own tribunal, a space where both he and his campaign would stand scrutiny and await a returned verdict.

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The distinguished attendees arrived at the Green Mansion sometime around eight in the evening. The meeting took place upstairs in a room Sherman turned into an office. There may have been a map or two on the table while all the papers—packets of intelligence, correspondence, reports—would have undoubtedly been bundled up and moved away. Empty and half-drunk coffee cups had probably been picked up as well; and despite the room's elegance, it was also likely cleared of any tobacco plugs or cigar nubs. Staff officers, meanwhile, probably buzzed about and hovered around; one or two assistants may have even arrived during the proceedings—no doubt carrying news or reports of comings or goings in or around the city. One assistant in particular, an adjutant to Stanton named Edward D. Townsend, a New Englander, had the honor of sitting with his pad and pen ready to take the only known recording of what was said.

In all likelihood, Stanton and Sherman sat together at a center table; the twenty Black ministers probably sat or stood somewhere on the other side. Though Garrison Frazier was the group's chosen spokesperson, each of the twenty ministers had biographies revealing why they

were there: Some were presently in charge of congregations; some had already retired; others like James Hill or Abraham Burke were lay ministers or deacons. Some like Alexander Harris were free born; others had purchased their freedom some time back; and remarkably, many like Jacob Godfrey, John Johnson, Arthur Wardell and several more had all been enslaved up until the day Sherman's army arrived in Savannah. There were also three different denominations represented—Baptists, Methodists, and a single Episcopalian—and collectively, the ministers had well over two hundred years of ministerial experience between them. Frazier and a man named Glasgow Taylor had the most at thirty-five years a piece; and while most of the ministers tended to be on up in years, the two youngest attendees were still in their twenties and several were in their thirties. Multiple generations of Black Savannah—both enslaved and free— sat in a single room.²⁶²

One of the attendees deserves singling out as an exception. James Lynch, aged twenty-six, was the only one of the twenty guests not from Savannah or the surrounding area. Born in Baltimore to a free father and an enslaved mother, Lynch had formal religious training and arrived in the South sometime in 1863, landing first at Port Royal, where he served as a minister and missionary before moving over to Savannah, where he worked to build churches and schools. This is what he was doing at the time of the colloquy with Stanton and Sherman, but it is what he did after that made him famous. Following the war, Lynch remained on the coast for a spell, but he eventually relocated to Mississippi, got involved in politics, and in 1869, was elected Secretary of State for the State of Mississippi, becoming the first Black elected official in Mississippi's history. He would go on to become one of the most important Black politicians of

²⁶² See "Minutes of An Interview Between the Colored Minsters and Church Officers at Savannah with the Secretary of War and Major-Gen. Sherman," in Berlin, Fields, et. al. eds., *Free At Last*, 310-313.

his generation. His time spent in Savannah among the minsters and missionaries served as his training ground.²⁶³

Yet on that January evening in Savannah, 1865, Lynch, a budding political star, deferred to his elders—and in particular the group’s chosen spokesperson, Garrison Frazier. Born in Virginia, Frazier and his wife, Diana, had been brought to Georgia by his master fifteen years earlier. In 1852, he purchased his and Diana’s freedom for about \$1,000 dollars each and spent the next eight years pastoring Savannah’s Bryan Baptist Church. Though aging and in ill-health when Sherman arrived, a contemporary described him as a man “endowed with fair natural gifts, a commanding presence, and a good voice.” He had little in the way of theological training, but he could explain the Bible and had a knack for speaking in plain but impressive tones. Once the proceedings began, the meeting became a stage. Stanton, the presiding officer, was lawyer-like and formal. His questions—thorough, exact, and prepared—read like a deposition. But Frazier was cool, calm, and precise. He took command of the room as a pastor would a pulpit and never wavered. He not only answered Stanton’s questions, he did so with an almost timeless clarity that make his responses seem at once local and national, principled as well as practical, and somehow inherently political but also spiritual. We’ve been standing in his shadow ever since.²⁶⁴

The main topic of discussion for the evening was “matters related to the freed men of the state of Georgia,” which everyone took to mean the burgeoning refugee crisis currently gripping Savannah. But rather oddly, Stanton began by asking for definitions. It was an attempt, perhaps, to feel Frazier out and see if the old man knew what he was talking about. First, Stanton asked if

²⁶³ See Eric Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction* (1996). See also, Vernon Lane Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865–1890* (1965).

²⁶⁴ James M. Simms, *The First Colored Baptist Church in North America. Constituted in Savannah, Georgia, January 20, A.D. 1788. With Biographical Sketches of the Pastors* (Philadelphia: J.D. Lippincott, 1888), 128.

Frazier understood the details of the Emancipation Proclamation, which Frazier said he did and quickly explained; Stanton then asked an astounding, if oddly phrased, follow-up: “State what you understand by Slavery and the freedom that was to be given by the President's proclamation.” Frazier responded by offering perhaps the most concise definition of human bondage ever given. “Slavery,” he said, is “receiving by *irresistible power* the work of another man, and not by his *consent*.” “The Freedom,” as outlined in the Emancipation Proclamation, he then explained, “is taking us from under the yoke of bondage, and placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor, take care of ourselves and assist the Government in maintaining our freedom.”²⁶⁵

Slavery, freedom, the yoke of bondage, and the fruits of labor. With some provocation and in his own special way, Frazier managed to corral within his answer the two defining ideas of the war and the central crux of American history. On top of that, in answering the question as he did, he framed the rest of the discussion, ensuring that whatever came next would reach beyond Savannah and speak to the nation as a whole. Thus when Stanton followed-up by asking Frazier how he thought freed people could best take care of themselves, the wily old stouthearted minister took that narrow sliver of an opening and made a much larger statement. His answer was *land*. “The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor” he said to his two interviewers, telling them that he thought women, children, and the elderly could get started preparing the ground while the young men enlisted “in the service of the Government.” But the critical piece of the puzzle was land. Not just *having* land but *owning*

²⁶⁵ See “Minutes of An Interview Between the Colored Minsters and Church Officers at Savannah with the Secretary of War and Major-Gen. Sherman,” in Berlin, Fields, et. al. eds., *Free At Last*, 310-313.

land. He said again, “We want to be placed on land until we are able to *buy it* and make *it our own*.”²⁶⁶

Frazier here wasn’t answering Stanton so much as outlining a particular vision of freedom. Land, he recognized, was the great equalizer. It was the source of independence, wealth, industry, and it was the surest way for people to claim a stake in society. Landowning could provide an entry into politics or local government. It offered business opportunities and was a source of credit. Aside from that, land was inheritable, which meant it had generational value and was as good as a future investment; one’s children and one’s children’s children could continue to reap its rewards for years on end. Land, in other words, was a great green and clay-colored building block, the hearthstone on which freed people could begin building new lives out of bondage. It was also, from where Frazier sat, the only plausible long-term solution to the problem both Sherman and Stanton needed solving: What to do about the thousands of displaced refugees that had followed Sherman to Savannah? We know this was on Frazier’s mind because at one point he told the two men that he formed his opinion in talks with the refugees. He then registered his own amazement at what he’d seen, saying that their numbers surpassed even his own expectation.²⁶⁷

Yet even with land as the proverbial building block, Frazier’s vision rested on at least two other ideas. One was simply autonomy. This point came up most substantially when Frazier told Stanton that he preferred to live separate from Southern whites for the time being because, as he put it, “there is a prejudice against us in the South that will take years to get over.” For Frazier, this was a matter of pragmatism. He didn’t know how freed people could the get the fresh start

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

they deserved with a prevailing prejudice bearing down against them; all but one of his peers spoke up in agreement. Frazier then took an insulting question from Stanton and answered by insisting that freed people were more than capable of living together as a community. When asked whether he thought freed people had the “intelligence” to live by themselves, abide by the laws of the U.S., and maintain themselves as peaceably as good citizens should, Frazier gave his most direct answer of the evening: “I think there is sufficient intelligence among us to do so,” he said, and that was it. Nothing more, almost as if he didn’t want to dignify the question with any further response.²⁶⁸

The other idea so central to Frazier’s vision was that freed people had a right to American citizenship. Despite his talk of separatism, this idea was the underlying assumption behind all his answers. The War made the case for them: Not only had freed people been loyal to the government and faithful to the army, they’d served. Freed men put on uniforms, fixed bayonets, and fought and died storming parapets and siege lines; women, similarly, were the army’s laundresses, cooks, and nurses. Freed people had been the latent force behind so much of the army’s operations and had helped kill the Confederacy by destroying it from within. And as far as Frazier was concerned, he and his peers would continue doing their part: He told Stanton he and the ministers would recruit black troops and that to even think of aligning with the rebels amounted to “suicide.” “If the prayers that have gone up for the Union army could be read out,” he said at one point, “you would not get through them [in] these two weeks.” This alone—that freed people supported the Union while Southern whites didn’t—was reason enough for forging a new South on the basis of Black citizenship, and that’s what Frazier expected, even if he never said so explicitly.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

After Stanton pressed Frazier and the two parried questions back and forth, the mood in the room suddenly shifted. With the lamplight burning low and the conversation drawing to a close, Stanton excused Sherman so he could speak with the ministers alone. Everyone must have known what was coming. There was thus probably an awkward pause as Sherman exited and the ministers shuffled in their seats; Stanton then likely cleared his throat and looked at his notes before proceeding: “State what is the feeling of the colored people in regard to Gen. Sherman,” he said before asking if they considered him “friendly to their rights and interests, or otherwise?” Stanton—a nationally known attorney with years of bureaucratic experience—was being coy. He didn’t ask about Ebenezer Creek specifically. Nor did he ask about the refugees in general. He might not have necessarily needed to. The freed ministers may have heard the reports and knew that Sherman’s conduct provided the subtext to the entire evening. Or maybe they didn’t? Maybe they hadn’t heard the reports? It is also possible the Stanton didn’t want to know the specifics and was perhaps happy to leave Savannah having only skimmed the issue. In any case, instead of being specific, the esteemed Secretary simply cracked open a door and waited to see if Frazier would fling it open.²⁶⁹

He didn’t. In fact, Frazier did the opposite: He slammed it shut. “We looked upon Gen. Sherman prior to his arrival as a man in the Providence of God specially set apart to accomplish this work,” he said, saying further “and we unanimously feel inexpressible gratitude to him, looking at him as a man that should be honored for the faithful performance of his duty.” Many of the ministers had apparently called on the general just as soon as the army arrived, and Sherman treated them courteously and with respect, which further convinced them that he was both “a friend and a gentleman.” Frazier then offered the affirmative statement Stanton wanted

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

and Sherman hoped to get. “We have confidence in Gen. Sherman, and think that what concerns us could not be in better hands,” Frazier said. One of the ministers, James Lynch, spoke up that he had only “limited acquaintances” with the General and thus had no real opinion on the matter, but all the other ministers agreed. No one pressed the issue any further and there was nothing else said on the subject, which was all Stanton needed. After sailing to Savannah, confronting Sherman, and mounting a mostly perfunctory investigation, the case was effectively closed. The inquiry was over.

And with that, so was the meeting. Townsend notes that some further comments were made relating to the March more generally, but no one made note of them. The two parties probably shook hands and exchanged pleasantries; the ministers likely thanked the two men for meeting with them and once again pledged their full support. Everyone involved save maybe Sherman—who still grumbled about Stanton excusing him from the room when he wrote his memoirs nearly a decade later in 1875—seemed to consider the conference a success. The staff officers had all been impressed by the ministers and their comportment. James Lynch likewise wrote that he and the ministers walked away “blessing the Government, Mr. Secretary Stanton, and General Sherman,” their hearts “buoyant with hope and thankfulness.” Stanton was even said to have commented afterward that history had been made—that for the first time in American history representatives of the U.S. government went to people of color and inquired what they wanted for themselves.²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ See James Lynch, “Highly Important Letter from Georgia. Letter from James Lynch,” *Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia, Penn.) Feb. 4, 1865; “Gen. Sherman Taking Advice from the Negroes: Report of the Conference Between Secretary Stanton, Gen. Sherman, and the Colored People of Savannah,” *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* (New York, New York) Feb. 18, 1865.

Understandably, then, anticipation started to mount. News started to spread. The consensus was that this historic summit in Savannah couldn't have been for nothing and that either Sherman or Stanton must have some impending plan. The odds supported a land plan. The soldiers seemed to expect it. The freed people did too. A correspondent for the *New York Tribune* reported that after the January 12th meeting at the Green Mansion "it is understood here that the country will be electrified in a few days by an order from him [Sherman] partitioning" the abandoned plantations—which, the reporter went on, would establish "new freeholds" and lay "the foundation for a new social condition in the South." That, however, was about it. No one knew anything for sure. Stanton and Sherman kept things close to the vest, and the ministers didn't have any particular insight either. Yet none of this stopped anyone from assuming what seemed obvious, that whatever it was, it was going to be big, a momentous and fitting end to an otherwise monumental March.²⁷¹

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The rumors were all true. On January 16th, four days after meeting with the ministers, Sherman issued his Special Field Orders No. 15. The military injunction set aside a strip of land running thirty miles in from the coast between Charleston, South Carolina to Jacksonville, Florida for exclusively Black homesteading. The land—some 400,000 acres in all— was to be divided into equitable plots of about forty acres a piece, and further, no white person—except military or government officials—would be allowed in the area. In a separate order issued days later, there was even mention of furnishing freed families with the army's "partially broken down" pack animals, thus the origins of the phrase "Forty Acres and a Mule." As of yet,

²⁷¹ See "Reported Cruelty to the Negroes by Sherman's Army," *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* (New York, New York) Jan. 28, 1865. On soldiers expecting a land plan, see Byrne, "'Uncle Billy' Sherman Comes to Town," 111.

Sherman's orders represented the most drastic escalation in Reconstruction policy to date—in effect, a formal and military backed mandate saying that the federal government would confiscate Confederate property, redistribute it to freed families, and provide the startup materials needed to make something of it. It was a sign of just how radical Reconstruction could become.²⁷²

The problem is that Sherman didn't see it that way. To him and everyone in the War Department, the Special Field Orders was mostly a matter of strategic self-interest. Sherman, for one, had already begun planning his next move. In only a matter of days, his entire army would wake from its winter slumber and embark on a new and crushing campaign north through the Carolinas. Having such a large body of freed refugees following the army out of Savannah would only encumber what Sherman hoped would be the last campaign of the war. Sherman also knew that Georgia was just the beginning. Those ten to twenty thousand refugees that followed the army to Savannah and the thousands more it met along the way might be conservative estimates of what awaited the army in the Carolinas. Part of the calculation was that in settling freed people along the coast, the army might discourage freed refugees from following the columns and instead convince them to head south to the Sea Islands, where they could find potential homesteads of their own.²⁷³

Sherman was also finally doing what he was always reluctant to do: He was playing politics. While he had gotten an important vote of confidence from Frazier and all the ministers, it wasn't quite enough. There was still a lingering sense that he needed to do more to cover his

²⁷² O.R. Ser. 1. Vol. 47. Pt. 2, 60-63. On "40 Acres and a Mule," see O.R. Ser. 1 Vol. 47. Pt. 2, 115. See also, Foner, *Reconstruction*, 70-71. See also, Claude F. Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedman's Bureau and Black Landownership* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1978); Edward Magdol, *A Right to the Land: Essays on the Freedmen's Community* (Wesport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977).

²⁷³ See Foner, *Reconstruction*, 70-71. Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 219-220. See Sherman, *Memoirs*, Vol. 2, 250.

flanks and assuage his critics by settling the refugee situation more permanently. Moreover, though Frazier and the other ministers gave him positive reviews, who's to say that prominent Black leaders elsewhere felt the same? What about Northern abolitionists or freed people more generally? Also, what might the emerging narrative of Sherman's March and the reports that Sherman turned his back on the refugees do to the army's recruitment of black troops? With the war still raging and news of Ebenezer Creek now punctuating the capture of Savannah, these were critical questions, and both Sherman and Stanton realized that something needed to be done to shift public perception.²⁷⁴

Note the mention of both Sherman *and* Stanton. The order has always been remembered as Sherman's Special Field Orders No. 15, but the reality is that it wasn't necessarily original to Sherman. Stanton likely had a hand in drawing it up; some reports even suggested that Stanton was the sole author, though Sherman was in fact the author. Also, recall that Henry Halleck had urged Sherman weeks earlier to adopt something similar in an effort to quiet his critics and put the mean business of the March to rest. Garrison Frazier too. The initial contours of Sherman's orders map on to what Frazier outlined during the conference at the Green Mansion. The order endorsed Black homesteading, the core of Frazier's vision; it excluded whites from the surrounding vicinity, another of Frazier's key ideas; and it included a specific provision whereby families of enlisted men could still claim their homesteads while husbands and sons served in the army, which was yet another issue Frazier raised in the conference. One way to look at the origins of the Field Order No. 15 then is as something not quite specific to Sherman, but rather as

²⁷⁴ See Sherman, *Memoirs*, Vol. II, 250. Sherman never says this publicly. But recruitment was a major issue during his time in Savannah, and it was made more of an issue by Sherman's reputation and previous statements. The need to shift perception was alluded to by Henry Halleck back in his initial letter to Sherman letting him know about the "certain classes" speaking ill of him.

an amalgam combining what Halleck and Frazier proposed with what Sherman and Stanton would allow.²⁷⁵

On the topic of *origins*, there is also a point to be made about historical precedent. While redistributing confiscated plantations to freed slaves was a radically novel idea, giving away land was not. If anything, land schemes like this had been the most American of American traditions. For over two centuries, cheap, available land drove settlers westward, and from lotteries to preemptions, the federal government actively promoted settlement. A perfect case in point: the Homestead Act of 1862. Passed by the same Congress legislating the war and emancipation, the Homestead Act offered settlers 160-acre tracts of free western land if they agreed to settle and improve the land for five years; settlers didn't even need to be citizens to apply. Claimants just had to be over twenty-one years of age, which technically meant that African American were eligible, though relatively few would ever move west. Nevertheless, the point is that Sherman's Special Field Orders appeared at a time when federal land programs weren't utopian dreams, but American realities. They were the internal gears powering America's 'manifest destiny.' They are also part of a vast but forgotten American inheritance: As of the year 2000, about 46 million Americans could trace their ancestry back to an original homesteader, close to a quarter of all U.S. adults.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Sherman later wrote in his memoirs that he wrote the official order in conjunction with Stanton, but Northern papers speculated that Stanton was the real force behind the order. See "Letters from New York, No. XXVII," *The Liberator* (Boston, Mass.) Feb. 17 1865. See also "Minutes of An Interview Between the Colored Minsters and Church Officers at Savannah with the Secretary of War and Major-Gen. Sherman," in Berlin, Fields, et. al. eds., *Free At Last*, 310-313.

²⁷⁶ Douglas W. Allen, Homesteading and Property Rights; Or, "How the West Was Really Won" *The Journal of Law & Economics*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Apr., 1991), pp. 1-23 See also, Trina Williams, "The Homestead Act: A Major Asset-building Policy in American History," Paper commissioned for "Inclusion in Asset Building: Research and Policy Symposium," Center for Social Development Washington University, St. Louis, Sept. 21-23, 2000. See also, Kerri Leigh Merritt, "Race, Reconstruction, Reparations," *Black Perspectives*, African American Intellectual History Society, Feb. 9, 2016.

For a brief moment, Sherman's Special Field Orders seemed like a similar promise. It was a symbol, if nothing else, of the government's commitment to righting the wrongs of slavery and rebuilding American society in a new, brighter, and more equitable image. Thus the excitement and celebrations: On the evening of February 2nd, about two weeks after Sherman issued the orders and about a week after the army left town, close to a thousand freed people gathered at the Second African Baptist Church of Savannah right off Greene Square; apparently several hundred more arrived but had to be turned away because the whole place was packed to the rafters. Organized by Rufus Saxton, the gathering was one part town meeting and two parts camp revival. A freed organist led in the playing of old hymns; the choir sang patriotic songs; pastors preached and prayed, bringing their listeners to tears. Saxton then read aloud the order and encouraged everyone in attendance to strike off into the islands to claim their homesteads. It seemed that even the most serious of skeptics could believe that the Day of Jubilee had truly arrived.²⁷⁷

One of the men who heeded Saxton's urgings and struck off into the islands was a Savannah pastor named U.L. Houston (pronounced *House-ton*). Houston had been one of the twenty ministers to join Frazier in meeting with Stanton and Sherman. He was the pastor of the Third African Baptist Church, now the First Bryan Baptist Church on Bryan Street, and was one of the several pastors at the famous meeting who was still legally enslaved when Sherman's army arrived. He apparently bought his time from his master—meaning that for a fee of about \$50 a month, he leased himself and his labor from the man who owned him—and worked as a pastor on Sundays and a provision dealer during the week. His home and store just happened to be in the same building as the Old Bryan Slave Mart-turned-school house, which meant that for

²⁷⁷ Coffin, *Four Years of Fighting*, 420-223. See also, Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 225, Byrne, "'Uncle Billy' Sherman Comes to Town," 112.

most of his adult life he sat night after night and listened to the wailing cries of enslaved people on the verge of being sold. “It was hell, sir!” he said to Charles Coffin, the reporter, who took a shine to Houston and his story. “The wailings of the damned can never be more heartrending,” he said again, noting that the worst was hearing mothers cry for lost children and lying and listening as traders shuffled bonded men and women up the steps, their chains clanking as they went.²⁷⁸

In the late Winter of 1865, not long after the gathering at Second African Baptist, Houston led a contingent freed people out to Skiddaway Island—a marshy, inter-coastal island just south of Savannah—to start a new community of free holders. Coffin, who was already on good terms with Houston, trekked out with the group and reported on what he saw: “They laid out a village, also farm lots of forty acres, set aside one central lot for a church, another for a school-house; then placing numbers in a hat, made the allotment...[and] agreed that if any others came to join them, they would have equal privileges.” Coffin described it as like “the Plymouth colony repeating itself.” “So the Mayflower was blooming on the islands of South Atlantic!” he wrote, obviously nodding to the idea that Houston and company were busy planting a new society and undergoing a new type of founding. The settlers claimed close to five thousand acres, and for a want of ready cash, Houston arrived with goods from his provision store and was prepared to sell the rest—in effect, mortgaging his future—in order to raise money for the community.

In March of the same year, another venture of similar design sprung up on St. Catherine’s and the surrounding islands. It was led by a man named Tunis G. Campbell. Born free in New Jersey, Campbell spent most of his early life in New York working in the hotel business. He was

²⁷⁸ Coffin, *Four Years of Fighting*, 420-223. See Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 225-226.

a head waiter and steward; he even published a manual on hotel management for aspiring waiters. But waiting tables was an occupation, not a passion. When Campbell wasn't fetching water or serving wine, he was an active member in the Colored Convention Movement (an annual meeting of free Black leaders), and in the early 1830s, he founded his own special *anti-colonization* society, a group whose sole purpose was to oppose efforts at colonizing African Americans outside the U.S. He was said to have pledged "to never leave the country until every slave was free on American soil." Because of his zeal as well as his sterling reputation, Campbell was tapped in 1865 to head up a branch of the newly minted Freedman's Bureau, which is how he wound up leading a group of freed homesteaders on the islands surrounding Ossabaw Sound.²⁷⁹

The group struck out in early spring. Some were likely freed refugees from elsewhere in Georgia; some were likely natives to the coast. The whole community stretched across Colonel's, Ossabaw, and Sapelo Island, but the base of operations was on St. Catherine's, one of coastal Georgia's beautiful barrier islands known as the 'Golden Isles.' Campbell's job specifically was to allocate homesteads and manage the settlement process as outlined in Sherman's Special Field Orders, but that understates what actually happened: Campbell and company created their own self-sustained community. Just as on Skiddaway, the settlers allocated tracts of land, formed a new village, and established a system of civil governance. For all intents and purposes, it was a self-governing, autonomous community, and under Campbell's leadership, it showed early signs of success, becoming a model of what a wider reconstruction of

²⁷⁹ See Russell Duncan, *Freedom's Shore: Tunis Campbell and the Georgia Freedmen* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986). See also, Edmund L. Drago, *Black Politicians and Reconstruction in Georgia: A Splendid Failure*; Eric Foner (ed.), *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996). See also, Tunis G. Campbell, *Hotel Keepers, Head Waiters, and House Keepers Guide* (Boston: Coolidge and Wiley, 1848).

the South could look like and a pinnacle of the hopes and dreams embodied in Sherman's Special Field Orders.²⁸⁰

At the same time, even as these new communities were being born, cynicism was alive and well. The first signs of doubt came during a meeting in the new school house located on the former site of the old Bryan Slave Mart, just days after the big celebration at the Second African Baptist. Prospective freeholders—likely a mix of refugees and locals from Savannah—raised a valid objection: why should they leave Savannah for some unknown homestead? What if they had better prospects finding work in the city and didn't want to cut their teeth trying to turn a crop out of the untamed countryside? Freed people had also read the fine print. Critically, Sherman's orders granted only *possessory* claims to the land, not a full legal title, which raised all sorts of concerns about how permanent of an arrangement the so-called "Sherman Reserve" was supposed to be. "I can get a good living here, and don't want to go to the islands unless I can be assured of a title to the land," a prospective settler announced during the meeting, which elicited the only response the white agents could give: that they couldn't guarantee deeds, but that on the "faith and honor" of the United States, Sherman's orders were airtight and incontrovertible.²⁸¹

Concerns over obtaining legal title to the lands echoed the concerns coming out of the North. Reaction to Sherman's orders among northern free black leaders and anti-slavery types had been surprisingly muted—and mostly for this very reason. Most saw the scheme for what it was: a temporary fix to a strategic problem; a naked attempt to "colonize" freed people; not a

²⁸⁰ Ibid. Tunis G. Campbell, *The Sufferings of T.G. Campbell and Family in Georgia* (Washington, D.C.: 1877)

²⁸¹ See Byrne, "'Uncle Billy' Sherman Comes to Town," 112-113; Coffin, *Four Years of Fighting*, 433.

step toward the full reconstruction of the South, but a punting of the issue on down the road. Many of the familiar suspects—abolitionists and anti-slavery newspapers—denounced the orders; as did some unusual suspects, including General Benjamin Butler, a New England Democrat not known for being any sort of abolitionist. The chorus of people poo-pooing the orders grew so loud that James Lynch had to write from Savannah and say that while the orders weren't ideal, they received his "highest gratification" because they met "the exigencies of the present condition of the thousands of homeless, who, without it," he explained, "would remain...in a terrible chasm between freedom and slavery, or else crowd [ed] at military posts" totally "demoralized." That was the consensus from those on the ground: The Special Field Orders may not have been a universal salve, but in theory, they at least provided some sense of security.²⁸²

On this particular issue, Sherman was again his own worst enemy. His previous comments and policies destroyed his credibility on all things emancipation related. His Special Field Orders No. 15 was no exception. One editorial wrote that the recent notion that Sherman had "exceeded expectations" and gone "beyond the radicals" in laying "a foundation of negro free-holding in the soil of the South" was simply "an illusion." Sherman, the article alleged, had even written the paper saying his views were unchanged—that he still preferred keeping "the negro in his place," that he thought those in the north had "gone crazy about the nigger," and that he wasn't budging in his belief, or lack thereof, in Black soldiering. He would also later admit that the intent behind the Field Orders was exactly as everyone assumed, that he never wanted to reconstruct the South and that he envisioned the land claims as possessory claims only. So far as

²⁸² See James Lynch, "A Black Man's Opinion of Gen. Sherman's Order," *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* (New York, New York) Feb. 11, 1865. See also, "Letters from New York, No. XXVII," *The Liberator* (Boston, Mass.) Feb. 17 1865

he was concerned, that's all he had the authority do, and he wasn't interested in precipitating things any further than that.²⁸³

As a result, these hopeful attempts to attain homesteads along the Georgia coast slowly lost their footing. The Houston venture on Skiddaway Island collapsed within the year; most of the members migrated back to Savannah. The Tunis Campbell-led community further down the coast dug in and lasted much longer, but it too eventually dissolved, though that's a much longer, more convoluted story. Essentially, because the claimants only had possessory titles, they had no way of legally holding on to the land once ex-Confederates began returning south. In 1866, Campbell purchased a large tract of land on St. Catherine's and consolidated the community there. It existed for close to a decade. They grew their own food, ran their own local government, and Campbell was even elected to the Georgia State Assembly, though the legislature refused to seat him. Finally, after years of being harassed, threatened, disrespected, and investigated, the state of Georgia arrested Campbell in 1875 on trumped up charges alleging malfeasance in office. For that, he served a year as a convict-lease laborer working on a Georgia prison farm. The community lost the land, and when Campbell finally got out, he fled north, wrote a devastatingly sad memoir of his life, *The Sufferings of Reverend T.G. Campbell and Family in Georgia*, and never returned.²⁸⁴

But the communities on Skiddaway and St. Catherine's Island were always special cases. In all, nearly 40,000 people eventually settled on the roughly 400,000 thousand acres outlined in Sherman's Special Field Orders. Their experiences varied. Some settled as individual families;

²⁸³ "Reported Cruelty to the Negroes by Sherman's Army," *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* (New York, New York) Jan. 28, 1865.

²⁸⁴ See Russell Duncan, *Freedom's Shore: Tunis Campbell and the Georgia Freedmen*, 90-110.

others pooled their resources and settled as communities. Some re-settled in their old home place, taking over land on which they had lived, worked, and buried loved ones; others settled in places totally new and foreign. Similarly, some took up homesteads almost immediately. Many others took longer, and some undoubtedly got caught up in the tangled web of the settlement process—the slow workings of the Freedman’s Bureau, confusion over whose land was whose, and a general lack of administrative wherewithal. Some also managed to buy their land and hold on to it permanently. Others held on for as long as they could, but because the order was meant as a band-aide and never a solution, because it granted possessory titles only, and because President Andrew Johnson was a scoundrel who pardoned Confederate planters and gave them their land back, the dream of reconstructing the South on the basis of Black landowning remained elusive.²⁸⁵

It was also a dream that many of the freed refugees had trouble accessing in the first place. Sherman issued the Special Field Orders because of their presence. The refugees were the intended targets. But the orders were also the pretext the army needed to move out, which had the effect of leaving the refugees out in the cold. With the army marching off in South Carolina transports to Port Royal slowed, which stranded thousands of displaced people around King’s Bridge with little choice but to press into Savannah. In addition, with the army gone, the main authority in the region was suddenly absent, which created a vacuum of command that slowed the settlement process, trimmed resources, and made providing relief more difficult. Even further, without the army there to flex its muscles or flash its guns, local whites felt empowered to do as they pleased. They could resist Sherman’s orders, and returning planters in particular

²⁸⁵ See also, Foner, *Reconstruction*, 70-71. See also, Claude F. Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedman’s Bureau and Black Landownership* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1978); Edward Magdol, *A Right to the Land: Essays on the Freedmen’s Community* (Wesport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977).

often took advantage of freed people by signing them on to unfair labor contracts. Put simply, the army leaving was like a band-aide losing its adhesive, a fatal move that left the refugees to suffer in the lurch.

Then again, the suffering was fairly wide-spread. It is one thing to announce a land scheme like the Special Field Orders No. 15; it is quite another to implement it. Settling takes time. Those that managed to attain homesteads didn't get them over night; nor were the homesteads always operable upon arrival. The sad reality is that for many of the refugees, this was time they didn't have. Their feet hurt. Their bodies ached. They had been living out in the elements for weeks if not months. Food was hard to come by; so were clothes and shoes. Sickness ravaged the camps. Even those who happened to be on the first steamers bound for Port Royal faced at least a day or two packed into camp at Kings Bridge, maybe a day or two at sea, and then several days waiting on the islands before settling somewhere. Those that settled in Georgia likewise had to migrate and build homes, a task made harder when done on an empty stomach with empty pockets and a bad case of the chills. Sherman's Special Field Orders No. 15 addressed none of these challenges, which is to point out that while land was an elusive building-block and while Sherman's field orders represented an opportunity missed, land was never enough. The refugees needed more and never got what they needed.

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Sadly, the situation was arguably worse at Port Royal. Teams of missionaries waited on hand ready to teach schools, administer aide, and provide whatever help was needed. The islands around Port Royal had also been a sort of haven for freed refugees throughout the war. But that was then. This was now. For about a month—from Christmas, 1864, to late January, 1865—as many as 17,000 freed refugees arrived on the islands, a number that more than matched the

roughly 15,000 freed men and women already there under the aegis of the Port Royal Experiment. So many new inhabitants destabilized the entire region. The arrival of the Georgia refugees transformed the once small and self-contained freedmen's colony at Port Royal into the center of a sprawling crisis, an unfolding disaster that stretched up and down the coast and engulfed freed people from across the region. In one sense, what happened on the South Carolina coast mirrored what was happening in Georgia and was but a constitutive piece of the March's long aftermath. But at the same time, Port Royal was its own unfolding story—indeed, its own tragedy.

Chapter 6

Port Royal and Beyond

Around mid-afternoon on Christmas, 1864, Rufus Saxton waited along the docks at Beaufort, South Carolina. The wide crest of the Beaufort River glittered to his left; the cool breeze of a low country winter whipped in off the water. His hands likely writhed from fear and nerves. The first seven hundred of the freed refugees that had followed Sherman's army were set to arrive sometime that afternoon, and as the military governor of the islands, it was Saxton's job to integrate them into the project at Port Royal. He was staring in the face of a humanitarian catastrophe. Despite the many thousands of freed refugees that would soon arrive, he had no shelter for them to sleep in, barely enough food, and nothing to heal the deprivations of what had been a long and difficult march. The situation was so dire that his only recourse was to dash off a letter to the northern aid societies pleading for help. "So extreme and entire is the destitution of this people that nothing that you can afford to give will come amiss," he told his audience, hoping that the right amount Yankee ingenuity and northern benevolence might be enough stave off disaster.²⁸⁶

Ironically enough, when Saxton penned his plea for help, he figured he would soon be out of a job. The previous year had been so dispiriting for him that he tendered his resignation just before Christmas and was currently waiting for a response. Nonetheless, there he was walking the docks. The refugees were coming, and he didn't have any answers. No one did. The army simply transposed the great refugee crisis of Sherman's March onto the islands, assuming it was the best place for them. Saxton knew otherwise and had begged Sherman to send the refugees someplace that could sustain them. But Sherman didn't listen, and over the next several

²⁸⁶ Rufus Saxton Letter of January 6, 1865 in *Freedmen's Record*, Vol. I, No. 2 (February, 1865). See also, "Gen. Sherman's Freedmen," *New York Daily Tribune* (New York, New York) Jan. 1, 1865.

months the islands around Port Royal experienced one of the most dramatic transformations of the war.

It's true. Though the islands had already changed quite a bit since the start of the occupation, Sherman's arrival in Savannah and the subsequent movement of as many as twenty thousand refugees up the coast to Port Royal was by far the biggest shock of all, a jolt so large and destabilizing that it triggered an island-wide convulsion: Thousands of displaced people landed on the islands as a part of a mini, march-induced diaspora; the islands in turn became a melting pot of freed people from across the South—from Georgia, even as far away as Tennessee, and as the army moved north, the interior of the two Carolinas. As a result, the islands around Port Royal emerged as a new crisis-point in the long aftermath of Sherman's March. The freed population doubled, maybe even tripled, in a matter of weeks. New communities formed in previously un-occupied and out-of-the-way locations. And because of Sherman's Special Field Orders No. 15, the islands were once again turned into a testing ground for our national reconstruction, a space where the full breadth of the war's revolution would be won and lost.

This was the result Rufus Saxton feared most as he paced the docks on that cool Christmas afternoon. Yet, in the end, Saxton was unable to forestall what he so desperately wanted to avoid. A humanitarian disaster gripped the islands for the better part of three months, from late December, 1864, to March and early April of 1865. It was likely worse than anyone ever imagined. Scores of people got sick. Many died. Storms rolled in off the coast, causing relief shipments to slow. Hunger spread. There was also a lack of shelter and space, which forced arriving refugees onto peripheral islands away from any stable system of support. Under all this pressure, the Port Royal Experiment practically buckled. It remained in place and offered a

critical infrastructure. But the project's contradictory logics proved insufficient for the task at hand and were perhaps never more exposed than they were in those long three months. It all added up to a disaster. By the first glimpse of spring, 1865, as the war ended, freedom dawned, and a new America sat suddenly on the horizon, the situation along the Sea Islands spiraled into tragedy.

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The process began at once. On that Christmas afternoon, as the first of the refugees descended the gangway, Saxton and his subordinates realized the severity of the task at hand. H.G. Judd, the superintendent of Freedmen and one of Saxton's chief civilian subordinates, reported that most all of the first seven hundred arrivals were "women, old men, and children" and that "half had traveled from Macon, Atlanta, and even Chattanooga." While some came carrying a collection of pots, pans, and other utensils, most carried little more than the clothing on their back. "They were all utterly destitute of blankets, stockings, or shoes," Judd explained, writing that the children had been covered in the "only article not worn by the parents." Making matters worse was that though few showed signs of being seriously ill, "all were foot-sore and weary," which only underscored the urgency of finding relief. Hence, the scramble. On that first night, Judd tells us that only through a "vigorous effort on the part of all the friends [northern agents]" did they find suitable, albeit temporary, accommodations: "They [the refugees] were housed—packed—in a disused commissary building through the rainy night that followed," he wrote.²⁸⁷

As daylight broke the next morning, the search for more permanent accommodations continued. Here, Saxton and his staff made what later became a grave mistake. In his report,

²⁸⁷ H.G. Judd, "Appeal for Aid to the National Freedmen," *New York Daily Tribune* (New York, New York) Jan. 17, 1865.

Judd wrote that four hundred out of the seven hundred freed people that had arrived the day before were marched out with a guard detail to a designated location some three miles from Beaufort, where a collection of old army tents had been set up. This crude campsite would serve as yet another temporary home until more permanent accommodations became available. The plan, Judd explained, was to “scatter” the refugees among the plantations already housing freed families, but there weren’t enough “vacant tenements” to go around. Until then, the refugees would sit and wait and live in this makeshift campsite until something more permanent became available.²⁸⁸

The problem was that there was little time to spare. At the moment, food wasn’t the issue. With the Port Royal Experiment in place and the army now stationed on the islands, there was generally enough provisions to go around. The issue was a lack of blankets, clothing, and other items that might blunt the nightly effects of sleeping out in the cold. The situation had apparently gotten so desperate that Saxton and his staff resorted to handing out raw “linsey,” a plain, woolen fabric, so that the freed women could sew their own clothes, make their own quilts, or patch up holes in their recycled army tents. Except for some it was too little too late. Most, if not all, of the refugees had already spent weeks, maybe even months, living out in the elements, and the natural fatigue of such a debilitating journey with only the barest necessities had started to take its toll, which is why placing the refugees in the temporary camp was such a grave mistake. In only matter of days, large numbers of the new arrivals—as many as half, Judd tells us— started to fall sick from “exposure,” leaving him to report that “coffins go out each day to bury the dead.”²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

Given the seriousness of the situation and given, especially, the expectation that many more thousands of refugees had yet to even arrive, Saxton and his staff knew they needed help. Luckily, the project at Port Royal had flush friends with a history of supporting freed people in the northern aid societies. Formed early in the war, the aide societies were a collection of philanthropic organizations operating mostly out of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. With names like the Freedman's Aid Society, the fundraising wing of the A.M.A., or the National Freedman's Relief Association, a New York City-based organization, their collective purpose had initially been to hire and train teachers and missionaries, but as the war drew on, the scope of their activities expanded. They started raising relief money, purchasing food or supplies, and fitting out steamships bound for who-knows-where; all across the country wherever freed communities were, the aid societies raised funds meant to support them. That said, the situation at Port Royal was a special case: It was the initial occupation of the islands back in 1862 that called many of the organizations into existence, so in tapping them for support, Saxton was tapping trusted friends and reliable donors, folks that had been supporting the Port Royal Experiment since its inception.²⁹⁰

Saxton also had a trump card in his pocket that he knew he could play if he needed to, which gave his pleas some extra oomph. It was this: Most of those same funders of the freedman's aide societies had already raised a small fortune earmarked for the suffering citizens of Savannah. In fact, by the time Saxton wrote the northern aide societies asking for help, three full steamships were on their way to Savannah, including the *Daniel Webster*, which set sail from Boston and had been loaded down with: 1,000 barrels of potatoes, 300 barrels of beef, 200 barrels of pork, 100 tiercos (sic), 63 tiercos (sic) of ham, 800 barrels of kiln-dried corn meal, 300

²⁹⁰ See Richard B. Drake, "Freedmen's Aide Societies and Sectional Compromise," *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (May, 1963).

barrels of pilot bread, [and] 50 hogsheads of sugar.” The offerings were apparently so generous that not everything could make it aboard; a “large quantity of ham and cornmeal” had to be left back on the docks, lest the ship might sink on its way to Savannah, capsized from carrying too much freight.²⁹¹

Saxton though never had to double-down because the organizations did so for him. Leading members preyed on guilty consciences. “The very last cause for which we drew our purse strings make it impossible for us to tighten them against this,” wrote representatives from New York City’s National Freedmen’s Relief Association. “We have fed with abundant liberality the people of Savannah,” the members went on, insisting “Let us match that act of politic philanthropy to those who but a moment since were our enemies, by at least an equal generosity to those who never for a moment have been anything but our friends.” The New England Freedman’s Aid Society responded in kind, asking, “Will not Boston, which has so generously contributed \$30,000 for the relief of the white population of Savannah—friends and enemies—give at least one-third as much for black people, whose sufferings are much more severe, and *all* of whom are our friends?” Though it’s unclear how much was ever actually raised, at least some of the societies procured a sizable cargo—and kept at it. More supplies arrived later in February and into early spring, becoming a lifeline for a project teetering on the brink.²⁹²

²⁹¹ “Aid for Savannah—Departure of the *Daniel Webster*,” *New York Daily Tribune* (New York, New York) Jan. 17, 1865. See also, John P. Dyer, “Northern Relief for Savannah During Sherman’s Occupation,” *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1953).

²⁹² “Sherman’s Freedmen,” *New York Daily Tribune* (New York, New York) Jan. 17, 1865; “The Freedmen of Georgia,” *The Liberator* (Boston, Mass.) Jan. 20, 1865; “Acknowledgements” in *Freedmen’s Record*, Vol. I, No. 2 (February, 1865); “Incidents” in *Freedmen’s Record*, Vol. I, No. 3 (March, 1865).

As the various northern aid societies kick-started their fundraising drives, the great refugee movement to Port Royal throttled onward. Successive waves of refugees arrived by the day. Saxton and staff continued their scramble for adequate shelter. “Another great crowd of negroes has come from Sherman’s army,” wrote Laura Towne, the white teacher from Philadelphia, on January 6th, thirteen days after the first group arrived on Christmas. By now, Saxton and the team had abandoned their earlier plan to house the refugees in the make shift camp and begun simply dispersing them across the islands to find shelter wherever they could. At St. Helenaville, a small village on the tip of St. Helena Island, Towne reported that arriving refugees had either crammed inside a local church, where they probably slept on pews, or found refuge within the homes of freed people already there. The willingness that these freed families had in opening up their homes touched the sentimental Towne, who cheerfully asked a man named Brister, himself a refugee from Edisto Island, if he had “found any friends among the refugees from Georgia.” “All friends tonight,” he told her before stopping to confess “but I hain’t found no family.”²⁹³

Brister’s comment about not finding any family deserves dwelling on for a moment because it captures one of the key transformations happening on the islands: Old barriers had broken down, and the influx of refugees into Port Royal brought folks from various corners of the South into the same general location, which suddenly made reunions possible. Brister clearly recognized this, but so did many others, including two women who Elizabeth Hyde Botume, another white teacher, met while boarding a steamer bound for Savannah. The two women were going there to search for old friends who they suspected might still be there, and for the first time ever, they had the chance. And if Port Royal was becoming a mini-melting pot of people from

²⁹³ Laura M. Towne, *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne: Written from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862-1884*, ed. Rupert Sargent Holland (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1912), 148.

across the region, so was Savannah. When Botume arrived there later in February, she found it full of fresh faces and completely changed from only a month or so earlier. Large numbers of freed people had apparently left with the army. Others had moved out onto homesteads while those that remained were mostly folks that had pressed in from the “sand hills and lowlands” outside the city. So many moving people produced a social geography that was also moving and changing.²⁹⁴

Part of this general dislocation stemmed from the incredible social force of Sherman’s March and the varying refugee movements it caused. But part of it was also by design. Saxton and his subordinates were still trying to cobble together answers to the crisis at hand. The problem of finding permanent accommodations was no more resolved in mid-to-late January than it was on that cold Christmas afternoon when the first refugees arrived. As Saxton seemed to understand quite clearly, the somewhat stop-gap policy of placing refugees in the homes of freed families already on the islands worked, but only up to a point. There was only so much space available, and as more refugees arrived, the more that policy would prove utterly untenable. The only viable option was to expand—that is, seek out more space. So instead of cramming freed refugees into existing settlements where shelter was already at a premium, Saxton’s staff pressed out beyond Port Royal and started settling refugees on more peripheral islands.

One such island was place known as Morgan Island, located just northeast of Beaufort. Though abandoned and not all that far from St. Helena’s, its location—somewhat detached and in the middle of St. Helena Sound—made it difficult to ration and left it open to Confederate raids from up the Combahee River, a contested artery into the South Carolina interior.

²⁹⁴ Elizabeth Hyde Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contrabands* (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1893), 168-169.

Nonetheless, Edward Philbrick recalled a friend and colleague who went there to “receive and stow away stow away a hundred and fifty refugees from Georgia,” most of which “came from the shore counties near Savannah.” Hilton Head was another prime example. Hilton Head—a large, tennis shoe-shaped island on the south side of Port Royal Sound—had always been a part of the project at Port Royal (and indeed, the historic Mitchellville community was one of the first and best-known freedmen’s communities formed during the war), but its relatively large size made it an ideal place for the refugees to settle. A similar, albeit smaller, venture occurred on Daufuskie Island, a sparsely settled sea island nestled in between Hilton Head and Savannah, where by mid-summer nearly half the freed population consisted of refugees from Georgia’s interior.²⁹⁵

Still, the primary target for expansion remained Edisto Island. Located north of Port Royal on the opposite end of St. Helena Sound, Edisto had been occupied by federal troops earlier in the war but was abandoned in 1862 following a failed attempt to take Charleston and a subsequent withdrawal of U.S. forces. The freed people on the islands had been evacuated and re-settled throughout the project at Port Royal, becoming the first group of refugees to arrive *en masse*. With Sherman in Savannah and the Confederates now on the run, plans were made in early 1865 to re-occupy Edisto and turn it into a haven for the Georgia refugees. James P. Blake, a northern agent from New Haven, Connecticut and, later, the general superintendent of operations on the island, quickly became the point man for the project. He wrote north in early January saying that “it is in contemplation to colonize Edisto Island, S.C. with the Georgia refugees” and that he already had a “plan of colonization.” In what was likely an attempt to raise

²⁹⁵ Edward S. Philbrick to Elizabeth Ware Pearson in Elizabeth Ware Pearson, *Letters from Port Royal Written at the Time of the Civil War, 1862-1868* (Boston: W.B. Clarke and Company, 1906) 295-296; Quoted in Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction*, 70.

money and support for the venture, a colleague would write again, days later, describing Edisto as the “gem of the Sea Islands” and listing the conditions that made it an ideal place for a new settlement. In the end, Blake’s efforts paid off. The plan moved forward, and by April, Blake found himself the general superintendent of an island that was now home to as many as five thousand freed men and women.²⁹⁶

While islands like Edisto, Daufauski, and Hilton Head were all links in the same Sea Island chain, moves such as these loomed far larger than geography might suggest. On one hand, we can’t forget the refugees and what they would have experienced. For those from the interior of Georgia, landing in the sea islands would have been like landing in another world—a place culturally distinct, far from home, and with its own separate war-time history, including a history as part of the Port Royal Experiment. On top of that, each day spent tramping out to some unknown and abandoned location meant another day marching or another boat ride, which likely meant more time spent sleeping in the elements and more time exposed to a stiff winter wind. Plus, because most of these places had all been abandoned—or like Daufauski, sparsely settled and accessible only by water—there was little in the way of infrastructure: Only a few cabins. Little food or utensils. Dilapidated docks. Nearly everything needing to be built or provided from scratch. To the Georgia refugees, men and women who had followed Sherman’s army for weeks, it was as if their experience was never ending, as if the march never stopped and that they were still one step away from being truly settled or safe. Freedom, it seemed, kept coming in and out of reach.

²⁹⁶ James P. Blake Letter to Mrs. Stevenson, Jan. 7, 1865 in *Freedmen’s Record* Vol. I, No. 2 (February, 1865); “Edisto Island,” *Freedmen’s Record* Vol. I, No. 2 (February, 1865); N. Blaisdell Letter, April 24, 1865 in *Freedmen’s Record* Vol. I, No. 7 (July, 1865).

On the other hand, take a step back, look at a map, see all the different coastal enclaves, and consider what these various movements meant for the islands as a whole. Refugees from Georgia landed and tried to settle in new, sometimes far-away locations. Freed people from one island relocated to another. Communities with ties running generations deep were shuffled and reconstituted—and in some cases, moved and reformed elsewhere. Not only that but plantation boundaries had started to fall away and free homesteads and settlements sprung up out of the ashes of the old. As a distinct micro-region, the Sea Islands were effectively refashioned in the shadow of Sherman's March. The federal occupation initiated some of these changes back in 1861; the region's unique history of emancipation via the Port Royal Experiment gave it its wartime shape. But it was Sherman's March and the crisis it unleashed that transformed the entire region, proving that what came *after* the March was as much a crucible, as much an ordeal, as the March itself. This was true for the refugees, but it was also true for the Sea Islands as a community.

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Back in Beaufort, the city's sand-hewn streets were full of hoof-prints and boot-marks. Starting on January 3rd, the day after the Emancipation Day parade, blue-coated soldiers began marching in. These first regiments were followed by more soldiers, who were followed by still more soldiers, and before long, it seemed that the long blue lines just kept coming. "The troops continue to come by the thousands," wrote Willard Saxton, noting that with all the new troops stalking the streets it was high-times for the city's merchants. "Troops continue to arrive, and the town is full of activity," he wrote again two days later. Everything was hustle and bustle. "The army move[s], & there is so much excitement, a rush horses, & men, & and a crowd of teams," he wrote again on the 13th, now a little frustrated that the increased street traffic disturbed his

routine jaunts around the island. All in all, two full army corps—Sherman’s entire right wing, a force of about thirty thousand men—marched through Beaufort and its vicinity during the month of January, 1865, enough for Willard Saxton to declare that “this island has never seen such life.”²⁹⁷

The soldiers were all Howard’s men—members of the Army of the Tennessee. A Bowdoin-man with a long, muscular beard and warm, gentle eyes, Oliver Otis Howard commanded Sherman’s rightward flank during the March to the Sea. The war had been anything but kind to him. He was hit twice in his right arm on the Virginia Peninsula in 1862 and had to have it amputated; his sleeve hung pinned and empty for the rest of his life. To add insult to his otherwise obvious injury, two successive poor showings at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg nearly ruined his reputation and left him humiliated: it was his men who Stonewall Jackson famously flanked at Chancellorsville, a historic ride-around that collapsed the federal line and forced a full-scale retreat. Months later, those same troops skedaddled through town on the first day at Gettysburg, a mortifying and some would suggest *unnecessary* flight that got Howard and his men transferred to Chattanooga, a move that wasn’t styled as a face-saving reassignment but very much was. From then on, it was clear that if O. O. Howard wanted redemption, he’d have to find it in the west.²⁹⁸

Yet despite him being a bit of a whipping boy for the army in the east, Howard never lost his characteristic sensibility. He was known as “the Christian general.” He was pious, evangelical, and hated profanity about as much as he hated whiskey; he once even considered

²⁹⁷ Willard Saxton Diary, January 5, 6, 11, 13, 1865.

²⁹⁸ William S. McFeeley, *Yankee Stepfather: General O.O. Howard and the Freedmen* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1970). David Thomson “Oliver Otis Howard: Reconsidering the Legacy of the ‘Christian General’” *Nineteenth Century History*, vol. 10 no. 3 (Sept. 2009) pp. 273-98.

leaving the military for the ministry. But what people remembered him for was less his bible-thumping and more his general disposition. He was polite, principled, and genial, a warm-hearted foil for some of the other senior members of Sherman's high-command—men like the known killer Jeff C. Davis, the always self-promoting Frank P. Blair, or the reckless cavalryman Judson Kilpatrick, otherwise known as “Kill-Cavalry,” who would later famously flee pants-less during a Confederate surprise attack (He just happened to be in bed with a beautiful Southern socialite named Marie Bozer when the bullets started flying). Because of these qualities and probably also because he was a fellow New Englander from Southern Maine, Howard fit right in among the so-called “Gideonites” working on the islands. Rufus Saxton came to respect him deeply during the army's stay in Beaufort and considered him a friend and ally. Willard did too, describing him at one point as a “very pleasant gentleman, affable, agreeable, & an exceedingly good man.”²⁹⁹

Willard would know. He and his older brother acted as Howard's unofficial hosts for the month or so the army spent stationed on the islands. The trio dined together, entertained each other, and worked closely. It helped that Willard had his wife and young son, Eddie, with him in Beaufort, which kindled in Howard thoughts of his own family, including his children who were about that age. Howard also had his younger brother Charles—who had actually left on a trip home upon arriving in Savannah—serving as his *aide de camp*, just as Willard was to Rufus, a coincidence that fostered a natural bond between two sets of men, two sets of brothers, whose wartime spheres just happened to converge. For Howard, this warm welcome made his time at Port Royal a pleasant experience. It was a brief respite from the grueling drudgeries of command and a much-needed rest from a month of hard marching. The only problem was the weather. The

²⁹⁹ Willard Saxton Diary, January 4, 1865.

gulf stream blew in dismal skies throughout January. It was colder than normal, or so it seemed. And the brisk wind and sodden, seemingly water-logged air had everyone worrying over their health.³⁰⁰

Nevertheless, in between storms and when official military duty didn't call, Howard joined the Saxtons and others in touring the islands. Of special interest to him were the schools. He made stops at several of them. He visited Laura Towne's school at the Oakes Plantation on St. Helena Island. One teacher tells us that his missing arm "made quite the impression on the children." He also stopped at Elizabeth Hyde Botume's school at the Old Fort Plantation about five miles from Beaufort, where he stood earnestly to the side as the children sang their songs and learned their lessons. He then took some time at the end to give a few brief remarks, the gist of which encouraged the students do their best. As a former Sunday school teacher and an ex-mathematics instructor at West Point, Howard found himself back in his element. The schools were a sanctuary for him and the children, and fortunately enough, there were plenty to visit. For no other place in the wider landscape of the war had as many freedmen's schools concentrated in a single area, and nowhere else had as many teachers operating as securely as they were at Port Royal.³⁰¹

Unfortunately, two of the best-known teachers were absent during Howard's stay. One was Charlotte Forten. Born free in Philadelphia to a family of prominent African American abolitionists, Forten came south to the Sea Islands in 1862 as one of the first Philadelphians and

³⁰⁰ See McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather*, 46. On the weather, see Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 322.

³⁰¹ See McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather*, 46. See also, Harriet Ware Letter, in Elizabeth Ware Pearson, *Letters from Port Royal Written at the Time of the Civil War, 1862-1868* (Boston: W.B. Clarke and Company, 1906), 299. Botume, *First Days Among the Contraband*, 112. See also, Robert C. Morris, *Reading, 'Riting, and Reconstruction: The Education of Freedmen in the South, 1861-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

the first African American to join the newfangled Port Royal Experiment. She taught at the Penn School—or what became the Penn School—and later published a long, two-part essay titled “Life on the Sea Islands” in *The Atlantic Monthly* (now just *The Atlantic*), which documented her experience. She wrote vividly about her teaching, her pupils, the project’s successes, its failures, meeting Robert Gould Shaw of the 54th Massachusetts U.S.C.T., and the immense sadness she felt as she tended the wounded and dying following the assault on Battery Wagner. She was one of the great documenters of the war and of African American life in general—and nowhere more so than in her journals and diaries, which run in five volumes and span from 1854-1864 and later 1885-1892 after she had become a lifelong teacher and suffragette. Forten and Howard never crossed paths at Port Royal because she sailed home some time in 1864 after suffering a bout of ill-health.³⁰²

It was a similar story for Suzie King Taylor. Unlike Forten, who was born free, Taylor was a born a slave in Liberty County. At just fourteen years old and with her hand clasped to her uncle’s wrist, she was one of hundreds of enslaved people who escaped to federal gunboats off the Georgia coast in 1862 and later found a de-facto freedom living at Port Royal. She soon married a member of the First South Carolina Volunteers, the early U.S.C.T. regiment founded on the islands, and quickly became the regiment’s laundress, nurse, and teacher (Taylor received an “underground education” from a free black teacher while living in Savannah as a child). While there, she became something of a headmaster for the entire regiment. She taught scores of adult men how to read and write in between drill sessions and the sound of the morning bugle. After the war, she served a brief stint teaching school in Savannah and on St. Catherine’s, and

³⁰² See Brenda Stevenson, ed. *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké* (The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). See also Charlotte Forten, “Life on the Sea Islands” (Pt.1-2) *The Atlantic Monthly*, May & June, 1864.

she would later publish a famous memoir titled *Reminiscences of my life in Camp with the 33rd United States Colored Troops, Late 1st S.C. Volunteers*. She, too, missed Howard that January because she was away with the regiment on one of the islands near Charleston waiting on the city to fall.³⁰³

Even so, the classrooms Howard visited and the children he spoke with left an indelible impression. Although he was surprisingly ambivalent about slavery as the war began, he was now about three-quarters of the way through an evolution that would see him become not just an anti-slavery general or an advocate of emancipation, but a champion of Black civil and political rights. His time touring the classes at Port Royal was a revelation. To Howard, a lifelong and committed educator, the freedmen's schools were models of reconstruction in miniature. They were examples of what was possible and represented what to him were the key building blocks of a new and reconstructed South. Education, like land, had generational value, but what education had that land didn't was the ability to start leveling society if not immediately, then hopefully over a single generation. It was, in his mind, the equalizer of all equalizers and the best form of personal capital anyone could have. Such is why when Secretary of War Edwin Stanton came to visit the islands after meeting with Sherman in Savannah, Howard insisted that the secretary visit the schools. He wanted the notoriously inscrutable secretary to have the same experience as him.

As Howard toured the schools, elsewhere on the islands his men—all 30,000 or so of them—were making their presence known. Armies are like tidal waves. They engulf localities

³⁰³ Catherine Clinton, "Susie King Taylor: 'I Gave My Services Willingly,'" in *Georgia Women: Their Lives and Times*, vol. 1., ed. Ann Short Chirhart and Betty Wood (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009). See also, Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp: An African American Woman's Civil War Memoir* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006). Suzie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33rd United States Colored Troops, Late 1st S.C. Volunteers* (Boston, published by the author, 1902).

and leave them shells of their former self. Port Royal, Beaufort, and the surrounding islands were no exception. Despite being an army outpost for much of the war and despite not having any local resistance, the islands groaned from the pressure the army put on them. Consider just the basic numbers: Howard's 30,000 troops nearly doubled the arriving 17,000 refugees, who themselves settled among 15,000 freed people, plus an assortment of treasury agents, teachers, missionaries, superintendents, and not to mention, Saxton's staff or the soldiers and sailors who were already there. At the time, beyond those muddy trench lines of Petersburg, Virginia, where Grant's massive federal army had Lee's men pinned outside Richmond, Port Royal may have been the densest, most concentrated theater of the war. And if the arrival of that many refugees threatened to throw things into such a tailspin, the landing of so many soldiers did nothing but make a bad situation worse.

It didn't help that the soldiers turned the islands into their own stomping grounds. They camped about four miles from Beaufort and were rowdy, boisterous, and unruly guests. The pent-up anxieties of the march spewed out into sporadic acts of vandalism. The want of places to sleep and things to eat led to them taking what they pleased: Soldiers chased down and plucked chickens, plundered gardens, drank, fought, and likely kept the islands drenched in a thick helping of tobacco juice. The northern agents found the soldiers appalling. The always do-gooding "Gideonites" scorned their behavior and had a hard time even grappling with the sight of them. "The Western soldiers are rough, unkempt customers," wrote one, saying that most had long, shaggy hair and that the first days in Beaufort was "more amusing" to the mass of soldiers than the keepers of property. Willard Saxton wrote similarly. Upon seeing some of the first, grizzled regiments march in, he described them as "a rough looking set," noting with some amazement that it was "as if they'd seen service, as if marching & fighting was their business

instead of drilling and guard duty,” which perhaps says more about Willard and how much of the war he’d actually seen.³⁰⁴

It wasn’t long before this general rowdiness spilled over into violence, and as was the case elsewhere, freed people faced the worst of it. John Hill Ferguson of the Tenth Illinois described in his diary a night that reads like a mini-riot:

In a short time afterwards, a detail of 20 men and a sergeant was called for to each company to go up to town after rations. It was 10 o’clock P.M. when they reached town. I understand they broke ranks, went where they pleased, and cut up all sorts of devilment. Killed two Negro soldiers. Crippled and knocked down a number of others. A whole regt. Had to brought with fixed bayonets to guard them out of town. Another soldier from the Sixth Iowa was less explicit but perhaps more revealing when he wrote that that the “changed condition and new ideas concerning the freedmen gathered” at Port Royal was a bridge too far. The men had recognized freed slaves as “true and loyal friends” and had treated them “kindly and generously about camp, but not many had learned to meet them on terms of equality in all the public and social conditions of life,” the soldier wrote. For the first time, the soldiers were seeing the full fruits of the war—the final endgame of this new American revolution—and they didn’t like what they saw. The Iowan said as much. “The *new and radical customs and conditions* found in the town at once engendered severe friction between the men and the colored people,” he wrote, saying somewhat euphemistically that this tension caused “*considerable disturbance and some altercations* (italics added).” Saxton, in fact, was so fearful something might erupt on the streets of Beaufort that he eventually banned freed people from entering town.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁴ See Stephen R. Wise et al, *The History of Beaufort County, South Carolina*, 368-369. See Letter from C.P.W. in Elizabeth Ware Pearson, *Letters from Port Royal Written at the Time of the Civil War, 1862-1868*, 297. See also Willard Saxton Diary, January 4, 1865.

³⁰⁵ Ferguson, John Hill. *On to Atlanta: The Civil War Diaries of John Hill Ferguson, Illinois Tenth Regiment of Volunteers*. Edited by Janet Correll Ellison with assistance from Mark A. Weitz. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 96 Wright, *History of the Sixth Iowa*, 396. On Saxton, See Wise, et. al. *History of Beaufort County*, 369.

These “altercations,” as the soldier describes them, were new versions of an old problem. From the earliest days of the Port Royal Experiment, it was clear that the soldiers stationed on the islands resented the freed people and even scoffed at what they considered the lily-livered work of the northern agents; hence, the term “Gideonites,” which the soldiers first coined as a mocking pejorative. Saxton had been appointed for precisely this reason. He was there, as a military man, to manage divisions between the army and a set of grubby treasury officials, on one hand, and the teachers, missionaries, and freed people, on the other. He had done well up to this point, but with so many new soldiers stalking around, these tensions flared up once again. Some of Howard’s men thought the freed people were being pampered; others especially seethed over the fact they were fighting while the Port Royal Experiment continued on. As one soldier put it, “There is a great many niggers here, nigger regiments nigger schools and churches, the eternal nigger is everywhere and the only place I care about seeing him is with a musket in his hand.”³⁰⁶

With this in mind, it’s no surprise that impressment once again became a topic of concern. Laura Town specifically mentioned an incident in which recruiting agents shot and killed two freedmen for resisting recruiting agents. “Such things,” she said, “were not uncommon,” suggesting that Stanton confirmed as much on his visit to the islands in late January. Oddly enough, however, it wasn’t the recruiting agents who came under the harshest scrutiny. Rather, it was Rufus Saxton. The army’s recruiting abuses had long been a grievance of his. In late December of 1864, just prior to Sherman’s arrival, he brought it up again in an end of the year report to Secretary Stanton. The situation was so bad and the freed people so

³⁰⁶ Quoted in Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 55. See Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 323-324.

disheartened—first, by the land sales and then by the ongoing issues of impressment along with the army’s unequal pay—that he offered his resignation. But Stanton—a sharp, keen-thinking politician—headed him off. He let the resignation sit for a while. Then he gave Saxton a promotion. He then got Sherman to place Saxton in charge of recruiting by way of Special Field Orders No. 15, a sly, slippery move that he figured would solve the problem and keep Saxton from resigning.³⁰⁷

He was right. Yet while Sherman’s Special Field Orders No. 15 gave Saxton control of enlistments and kept him in line, Saxton’s appointment as the head of recruiting sparked angry outcries from some of his colleagues. None more so than J.G. Foster. Foster—a sort-of co-commander of the Department of the South and a real military man—wrote Sherman begging him to relieve Saxton of command. Saxton, he said, did more to encourage *settlement* than *enlistment* and apparently once threatened “to have the head cut-off of any officer who opposed him [on the issue].” “He [Saxton] is crazy on the subject,” added John Porter Hatch, one of Foster’s subordinates, suggesting that “Negroes misunderstand their recently acquired freedom” and that Saxton’s “course is thought to encourage them in their opinions.” Sherman later admitted to sympathizing with their concerns but basically said his hands were tied. If Foster wanted the appointment changed, he’d have to take it up with Stanton, though he didn’t think Stanton would budge. “I cannot modify my orders relative to General Saxton having the charge of recruiting blacks,” he wrote, admitting “The Secretary made that a point.” Foster tried to write Sherman again, but the squabble ended later that winter when it was Foster, not Saxton, who got reassigned.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁷ Towne, *Letters and Diary of Laura Towne*, 150. See Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 329-330. McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather*, 53-54.

³⁰⁸ See Foster Letter, January 31, 1865 in *O.R. Vol. XLVII, Pt. II*, 186-187; Sherman Letter February, 1, 1865 in *Ibid*, 201. Hatch Letter, Feb. 2, 212 in *Ibid.*, 211. See also *Yankee Stepfather*, 53-54.

O.O. Howard was long gone by the time this recruiting controversy bubbled to the surface. By then, he was somewhere in the South Carolina interior—likely Salkehatchie or Branchville—leading the southern wing of the march through the Carolinas. But before he left the islands he made one last decisive move that ended up altering the course of his career: He personally pledged Saxton his full support—and backed it up. He wrote to the new Secretary of the Treasury, William Pitt Fessenden, a former senator and Bowdoin alum, and gave his new compatriot a full-throated endorsement. “Whenever [Saxton] has been untrammelled in work, he has introduced system and order and industry among these poor people, in such a manner as to afford a practical example of the best method of dealing with the negroes, as fast as they are freed,” he wrote. He meant what he said. Howard believed Saxton’s leadership at Port Royal offered freed people their best chance at a full and meaningful freedom, and what he was basically asking was for Fessenden to call off his treasury agents so that Saxton could continue his work unabated.

Little did Howard know at the time, but in writing his old friend and fellow Mainer, he put his name forward for one of the most important positions in the country. As Congress pushed the Thirteenth Amendment toward passage in late January, it was also holding debates on a proposed Bureau of Emancipation. The idea—first proposed by the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission—was for the government to create an agency-like body designed to help usher former slaves into freedom. The issue was how? Divisions among members mirrored those mirroring up the works Port Royal. More moderate members imagined a scaled-back approach, fearing that too much federal help would lead to dependency; others advocated a more robust involvement, imagining the bureau as the federal muscle behind the wider reconstruction of the South. The initial scope for the project thus only included relief in the form of food, shelter, and

assistance to displaced people. But as passage neared, the Bureau's mandate expanded to include settling abandoned lands, which gave it greater latitude in handling freedman affairs. Finally, on March 3rd, in the waning hours of a legislative session, Congress formally established the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands—an institution best known as the Freedman's Bureau.³⁰⁹

Two months later, in early May, O.O. Howard became the Bureau's first and only commissioner. After fighting a war that took his right arm and parts of his dignity, he was now head of a federal body charged with managing emancipation. It wasn't exactly a success. The Freedman's Bureau was always underfunded, too paternalistic, and it never had the enforcement mechanisms it needed. Its many failings have a lot to do with why the war's revolution ultimately bent backwards not forward. Yet its failings aside, the Freedmen's Bureau also carved out spaces where Reconstruction worked. It allied with freed people on the ground and helped them settle on land. It created its own court system. Its agents managed plantations and mediated labor disputes. It also—and this is by far its greatest success—built hundreds of freedmen's schools across the south, many of which are still standing and represent some of America's first public school systems. Howard doesn't deserve all the credit. The Bureau wasn't shaped in his image, and he certainly didn't do all the work. But he did, as its head, mold it in the image of Port Royal. His experience that January was both his benchmark and his blueprint, which made what happened at Port Royal a basis for Reconstruction not just on the Sea Islands but across the post-war South.³¹⁰

³⁰⁹ See Foner, *Reconstruction*, 68-69. See also Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule*, 20-21.

³¹⁰ On the Bureau and its history, See Paul Cimbala and Randall Miller, eds. *The Freedman's Bureau in Reconstruction: Reconsiderations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999). See also Mary Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedman's Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010). On Howard and his appointment, see McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather*, 61-64

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Land reform became part of the Freedman's Bureau's mandate in part because as of January 16th, 1865, the day Sherman's Special Field Orders No. 15 went into effect, the federal government suddenly had a lot more land—about 400,000 acres worth to be exact. In fact, the Bureau's land provision—allotting forty acres per homestead—mirrored Sherman's Special Field Orders, and though the provision didn't redistribute land outright (it offered freed people the chance to preemptively purchase the land), most saw it as building on the program Sherman had already put in place. Therein lies the essential irony behind Sherman's Special Field Orders: it was only ever an expedient, a temporary answer to the army's problems, but in letting the genie out the bottle, it thrust land policy into the center of debates about Reconstruction. Widespread land reform now suddenly seemed not just possible but perhaps appropriate. Confiscating abandoned plantations gained increased support among Republicans, many of whom argued that it was not only morally right, but the just deserts of treason. Radicals clamored for more, holding that the current policy didn't go far enough in restructuring the social order of the South. And as important, freed people everywhere started to believe that land reform was no longer a matter of *if* but *when*.³¹¹

Yet while Sherman's Special Field Order shoved land onto the national agenda, it also brought immediate changes to the day-to-day operations of the islands. First of all, it named Rufus Saxton the "inspector of settlements and plantations," which placed him in charge of the entire operation and made it his job to see that settlement went off as specified. It was one of his many hats—including military governor, head of recruiting, and the de-facto leader of all the

³¹¹ See Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 338; Lawanda Cox, "The Promise of Land for the Freedmen," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLV, (December, 1958), 413-440. See also, Foner, *Reconstruction*, 69-70. See also Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule*, 46-47.

northern agents. Except this hat was one he didn't want to wear. It turns out, he, like so many others, saw right through the Special Field Orders. He knew it was but a half-hearted attempt to colonize freed people, not actually settle them permanently, and he feared it would only end with freed people being more broken hearted and disaffected than they already were. Nevertheless, he eventually said yes. Despite his doubts, he assumed leadership over a project doubling, maybe even tripling, in size and a settlement program that would soon embody the essential work of Reconstruction.³¹²

Second and perhaps most important of all, Sherman issuing his Special Field Orders No. 15 gave him the cover needed to cut and run and start his next campaign. Preparations for his move into the Carolinas began almost as soon as the ink dried and the orders posted. In about fifteen days, lightning-fast time by military standards, Sherman's massive federal army leapt back into motion. Slocum's left wing moved into South Carolina from above Savannah, crossing the river near a place called Purrysburg. Howard's right wing moved up through the islands from the coast. The Shell Road—the main road connecting Port Royal to Beaufort—acted as the central thoroughfare. Soldiers continued landing via boat at Port Royal, marched up the road to Beaufort, and then moved on in ceremonious columns into the interior of South Carolina. From there, the plan was to have the two wings converge near Salkehatchie, then have Slocum and Howard's men move as one giant wall toward Columbia, the state capital and perceived heart of the rebellion.

The army's mobilization out of the islands on the shell road—a thundering, whale-of-a-movement down a road covered in the gravely remains of old conch shells and oyster hulls—was itself a kind-of sight to behold. The town was already crowded. New troops arrived by the day.

³¹² See Sherman's Special Field Orders No. 15. See also Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 330.

Steamers carrying soldiers over from Savannah landed at Port Royal in quick succession. “The greater part of the whole army seems to be coming around this way and marching over the Ferry toward Pocotaligo,” wrote Edward S. Philbrick, referencing the first stop on the mainland. “It has the look of success to see such an army in motion,” wrote Willard Saxton, describing an early advance movement off the islands. He thought that seeing Sherman’s large army move with its power and force made all the other expeditions on the islands seem insignificant by comparison. Of course, as the army moved it also consumed. O.O. Howard would even write back to Rufus Saxton practically apologizing for his men’s behavior as it moved, a gentle nod to all the stolen chickens reported by freed people and the all the looted fence rails used for fire wood. Mary Still, another white teacher living on the islands, perhaps said all that needed saying about the power of the army’s movement when she wrote two months later the different schools still hadn’t recovered from the mighty “check” they received from the force of Sherman’s marching army.³¹³

Yet the real problem with the army’s move out of Beaufort wasn’t necessarily the force of its movements so much as that it left people behind. So long as troops remained on the islands and Sherman still had his headquarters in Savannah, there was a steady flow of steamers full of refugees and supplies back and forth. When the army moved out, the convoys stopped. Priorities changed. The naval forces there to support the army redirected attention to operations further up the coast to places like Charleston and Wilmington while Beaufort was left in the rearview. The same was true for the camp at the King’s Bridge, the army’s unofficial depot and point of

³¹³ Letter from Edward S. Philbrick, Jan. 9, 1865 in *Letters from Port Royal Written at the Time of the Civil War, 1862-1868*, 302. Willard Saxton Diary, January 13, Yale University Library Manuscripts and Archives. McFeely, Yankee Stepfather, 56. Mary Still, “Letters from Beaufort, S.C., No. 2” *The Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) April 29, 1865.

departure for transports to the islands. As a result, the army left thousands of refugees stranded in Georgia on the banks of the Ogeechee with nowhere to go. James P. Blake, the future superintendent on Edisto, who would later die in boating accident off the island a year later, estimated that only a small number of the total number of refugees that would arrive on the islands did so by the time the army left, implying that the rest came later and at a much slower pace. Tragically, of those stranded in Georgia he believed that at least a thousand must have died from “disease and exposure,” revealing once again that the greatest threat to the refugees were the threats nearest at hand: the elements and the army’s inability to manage a crisis it would rather ignore.³¹⁴

As the army moved into the interior a third consequence emerged. It was that the once confined and tightly-bound project at Port Royal saw its borders steadily expand. “Sherman’s operations have opened a wider sphere of negro work and have thrown a great number of refugees into our hands,” wrote William C. Gannett, one of the northern teachers. This was partly an administrative result of Sherman’s Special Field Orders in that it grouped the entire coastline from Charleston to Jacksonville into a single unit—or colony, as agents described it. But the real effects of the mandate only came when the army shoved off. Without the army’s presence in Savannah, for example, the onus of keeping the peace, administering aid, and overseeing freedmen affairs fell squarely on Saxton’s team of under-resourced agents and subordinates along with what military forces they could muster. The islands south of Savannah on the Georgia coast were all also suddenly now part of their purview, which stretched things even thinner. In fact, in early March, after setting up what he described as a “colonization office” in Savannah, Gannett wrote exasperated: “First, no steamer! Then, no coal! And when one can

³¹⁴ Letter from James P. Blake, February 11, 1865, “Extracts from the Teachers’ Letters” *Freedmen’s Record* Vol. 1 No. 3 (March, 1865).

be had, the other can't," admitting they ran woefully short on food. He later wrote that only a few of those who fled to the King's Bridge for help would ever receive any rations. They simply didn't have any.³¹⁵

Moreover, Charleston fell within weeks of the army's advance. The stars and stripes flying over the city where secession was born galvanized those at Port Royal, including the freed people, some of whom had relatives living in the city or on surrounding plantations; many of the northern agents even attended the ceremonial flag raising over Fort Sumter, a celebration full of speakers and celebrities, including the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and the once enslaved riverboat-captain-turned-national-hero, Robert Smalls. But the fall of Charleston also signaled that the project had an even wider sphere of influence. The islands south of Charleston—Johns, James, Wadmalaw, Seabrook—all fell within Saxton's ambit, and by early March, James Blake would write north to the New England Aid Society, asking that a "principal part" of their relief shipments be redirected to Charleston, where destitution "was found to be extreme, not only among the old and infirm residents of the place, but also among the many refugees from the interior." Even more, evidence suggests that as the army moved into North Carolina it sent some of the freed refugees down from Wilmington or Elizabeth City to Port Royal or Savannah, an extended ocean voyage that stretched the project's reach beyond the land outlined in Sherman's orders.³¹⁶

Meanwhile, the crisis continued. During the army's push into the interior and as more islands fell within the bounds the project, the situation worsened. By now, settlements had

³¹⁵ William C. Gannett to Elizabeth Pearson Ware, Jan. 23, 1865 in Pearson, *Letters from Port Royal*, 307; "Letter from William C. Gannett," *Freedmen's Record*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (June, 1865).

³¹⁶ James P. Blake, "Report of Relief Operations for the Department of the South, for March, 1865," *Freemen's Record* Vol. 1, No. 3 (March, 1865). On Family, See Botume, *First Days with the Contrabands*, 154. On N.C., See Letter from William C. Gannett," *Freedmen's Record*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (June, 1865).

started to fill to their limits. One such settlement was a place called Montgomery Hill. The settlement was originally built to house refugees from the so-called “Montgomery Raid” back in 1863. It now housed anywhere from three to four hundred refugees from Georgia. Elizabeth Hyde Botume, whose school on the Old Fort Plantation wasn’t too far away, described it as having a row of wooden boxes as houses. Within each house were four rooms, with each room holding a family of four to five. Each room had space for a shelf, a window, and a fireplace. Bunk beds—or berths—had been built into the walls, making each room a sort of “one-room cabin,” as Botume put it, describing the rooms as representing the “poorest and most meagre” existence. Another settlement not far from Montgomery Hill was a place known as Battery Plantation. About thirty-one refugees piled into a six-room house on an old plantation. A widowed father who just lost his wife lived there with his four sons, all occupying one room. The detached kitchen had also been turned into living quarters. Botume specifically remembered two sick women laying there in the kitchen floor, resting on a bed of moss and corn-husks to ease the pain.³¹⁷

Both women died sometime in late January. They apparently asked Botume on their deathbed to watch over their children for them, though Botume would later say that three of the six children died not long after their mothers. The rates of sickness and death were compounded by slavery’s horror stories. Freed women, Botume explains, made it practice of visiting her front porch just to tell their stories. They spoke of their masters and their abuses and why they ran away. One woman who Botume got to know, a woman from Georgia, had her feet manacled by her master for years out of fear she’d run away. They left big, permanent welts on her ankles,

³¹⁷ See Botume, *First Days with the Contrabands*, 50-51, 82-84, 120-121.

and when Sherman's army came through, he left her locked in the corn crib. Scrounging soldiers heard her screams, broke down the door, and with her shackles still binding her feet, "partly dragged and partly carried" her along the March. By the time she arrived at Port Royal she could barely walk. Her muscles were strained and swollen. Deep cuts marked where the chains once were. Botume believed her exhaustion was so crippling that she'd only ever experience "spiritual freedom," but after being sent to the hospital in Beaufort, she apparently lived long enough "to rejoice with her people over emancipation," though her feet never healed and she likely never walked again.³¹⁸

By late January, the situation started to reach a breaking point. "The Georgia refugees are coming along by hundreds and thousands," wrote Edward S. Philbrick, the private landholder on the islands. William C. Gannett, the northern teacher, thought the situation so bad that he personally wrote north begging for assistance. "If there is any movement in Boston for the assistance of the negro refugees that Sherman's operations throw into our hands it would be of the greatest benefit," he claimed. He remembered the aid given three years ago when the occupation began and acknowledged that "much was given." "But now hundreds are coming in, shivering, hungry, so lean and bony..." he explained, saying that:

Old men of seventy and children of seven years have kept pace with Sherman's advance, some of them for two months and over, from the interior of Georgia; of course little or nothing could be brought but the clothing on their backs and the young children in arms. Since their arrival in comparatively comfortable quarters, great sickness prevailed, and numbers and numbers have died.

³¹⁸ Ibid, 82-84, 140-141.

The government was working to distribute rations and blankets, he assured them, but he told his audience that if “Northern friends” could also send aid “nowhere can generosity be better extended.”³¹⁹

Over at The Oaks on St. Helena where Laura Towne lived the story was much the same. After welcoming some of the first arrivals back in early January, successive groups arrived not long after that. Many of these men and women, Towne tells us, arrived from the estate of Peirce Butler. Butler—once the second largest slaveholder in the state of Georgia, who owned a small island empire near the coastal town of Darien—was notorious. Not only had he married a famous British actress named Fanny Kemble, who scandalously divorced him and later exposed the horrors of his plantation in a widely read journal published in 1863, he was the perpetrator of the largest recorded slave sale in American history. In 1857, in an effort to settle his many debts, Butler—whose father was a signer the U.S. Constitution—sold over four hundred men, women, and children in a slave auction so large it took multiple days to complete and had to be held at a local horse track in Savannah. It apparently rained so hard those two days that the enslaved believed even God was weeping; enslaved communities likewise remembered the auction as the “Weeping Time,” as family and friends were sold away and a tight-knit plantation community splintered there on the starting line. The refugees that arrived at Port Royal were likely those that remained with the Butler estate—the men and women who wept, drenched in rain, for friends and loved ones sold away.³²⁰

Nevertheless, Towne could do little for them. “We have no clothes to give these poor shivering creatures,” she wrote, admitting “and I have never felt so helpless.” Quite a few

³¹⁹ Letter from Edward S. Philbrick, Jan. 22, 1865 in *Letters from Port Royal*, 306. William C. Gannett, Jan. 23, 1865, in *Letters from Port Royal*, 307.

³²⁰ See Laura Towne, *Letters and Diary of Laura Towne*, 148. See also, Anne C. Bailey, *The Weeping Time: Memory and the Largest Slave Auction in American History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

apparently arrived sick, and according to Towne, “nearly all” were “broken down with fatigue, privation of food, and bad air at night.” All Towne knew to do was to hand out hot tea to the ill, whom she described as “such a weary, sick, and coughing set.” Conditions, sadly, got worse before they ever got better. In fact, the way Towne describes the situation her village may well have been a hotspot in an emerging epidemic. The “poor refugees from Georgia,” she wrote, remained “frightfully destitute, sickly, and miserable.” They were apparently all “homesick, too,” Towne explained, saying that most expected to “enjoy freedom in Savannah or their backcountry homes in Georgia” but instead “pine in this uncomfortable and strange place, where they die so fast.” Disease ravaged the settlements. “The poor negroes die as fast as ever,” she wrote again days later, explaining that the “children are all emaciated to the last degree, and have such violent coughs and dysenteries that few survive.” Worse, such incredible rates of death had started separating families. Parents looked for lost children. Children looked for parents. One child recovered from “typhoid pneumonia” only to discover that her mother and brother and aunt all succumbed from the same disease, with another of her aunts “just [now] dying,” Towne wrote.³²¹

Conditions improved a bit by mid-February. Relief shipments began arriving. Clothes and blankets were being dispersed among those in need, and even more important, the weather improved, which reduced the number of deaths. “The terrible sickness and mortality among those in this village is much less now that the severe cold weather is over,” Towne wrote, which brought to light the sad reality that most simply died from exposure to the elements. Towne knew it too. “[The] Government gave each family a blanket or two, but that was bed covering all

³²¹ Towne, *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne*, 149-150.

in one, so I really think many actually died from cold,” she admitted. Others, she knew, may have gotten better but still had such “severe coughs” she wondered if they would ever truly recover. “Nearly all who are ill take the dropsy as they get better,” she explained, which meant they would get up and walk about until their lungs filled and then they’d “take to the floor” and pass only a day or so later. This was likely the case for most of the children, as Towne hauntingly wrote that as of mid-February: “Nearly all the children are dead, or [at least] a very large portion of them.”³²²

To make matters even worse, if the weather cleared by early February, March threw a new cog in the ongoing crisis. A terrible storm apparently delayed the flow of rations to the islands—quite possibly the result of ships being unable to refuel at coaling stations. In any case, food suddenly became scarce, causing Towne to admit that at St. Helena Village “there has been something very like starvation here.” The Georgia refugees bore the brunt of the shortages. “Being nearly reduced to starvation, and for the want of rations, which were stopped by the want transportation (coal for steamers),” she explained, the refugees from Georgia took to stealing “whatever was eatable.” They stole chickens and pigs. None of it mattered all that much in Towne’s telling though because everyone, she wrote, was “for a time reduced to eating salt food entirely”—meaning food that had been salted and dried and thus stripped of important nutrients like Vitamin C, which caused some in the village to develop scurvy. “It was trying enough for a week—indeed, for three or four weeks,—but for one week they were almost laid up,” she claimed.³²³

³²² Ibid., 154-158.

³²³ Ibid.

And it didn't end there. Nearly a year later, in March, 1866, Laura Towne still lived on The Oakes Plantation, though now she spent most of her time managing what she described as a "a kind of camp for black refugees." It had been well over a full year since Sherman stormed through Georgia and about as long since he left the islands, but the aftermath still loomed; so much death and displacement left a whole population—mostly orphans, the ill, the aging, and the infirm—with nowhere to go. Towne describes doing what she could for the orphans while some were "sent away to raise for charity at Saxton's recommendation." Where these children wound up has been lost forever. Moreover, the aging and sick never recovered: a blind man, who Towne described as "feeble and friendless," lived there with his young son, who led him about camp; another man, Ceasar Hicks, had a club foot and a peg-leg and was in ill-health; a man described as an "African," who Towne said was over a hundred, lived there among them; and perhaps saddest of all, a mentally unwell woman named Elizabeth lived there as well. There was only so much Towne could do for her, proving that the long shadow of Sherman's March extended well beyond the March itself.³²⁴

But the March was also only part of the equation. What happened on the islands during those long winter months was always partly a product of the project's own making. Indeed, no matter how well intentioned the northern agents were, no matter how feverishly they wrote north, no matter how sad they all were to see more coffins being built, the project's contradictory goals persisted. Take Laura Towne as an example. When the weather began to break in mid-February, she knew the expectation was for the refugees to start working as soon as their bodies would allow. Some had even already started. Except Towne didn't quite know what good that would

³²⁴ Letter from Laura Towne, March 3, 1866 in *Tidings*, No. 5 (April, 1865); Letter from Laura Towne to Mrs. Dr. Parrish, March 26, 1866 in *Ibid*.

do. As she wrote, rations had dwindled and “with the present low rate of wages and high prices of provisions,” she didn’t know how they would buy both food and clothing, thus keeping them deprived of even the most basic necessities. Edward Philbrick—the New England technocratic and plantation task master—had also begun assessing the refugees as potential laborers, determining that the “Georgia negroes” were a “superior looking set” compared “to those of these islands.” In his mind, they gave the impression that if the native islanders refused to work, “*somebody else would.*”³²⁵

Philbrick was without a doubt the worst offender. His doctrinaire approach to the free labor ethic kept freed people locked in a vice grip. “When I take my leetle bit money and go to the store,” a woman said to him once, “the money all gone and [it] leaves [my] chillum naked.” The woman and her sons had worked for him for three years, she said, and they were tired of never having enough. Philbrick responded by telling her that if anyone didn’t like his wages they were free to leave, though he wouldn’t allow them to plant corn or potatoes on what he called *his* land. Moments later, another woman spoke up and said that though she’d recovered from smallpox, she expected to work, wanted to work, and would work for him, but she implied it was only because she wanted to “lay my bone in dat air bush,” she said, as she pointed to the family cemetery. Philbrick replied that that was all well and good, but he affirmed what he said earlier. “I told them, too,” he wrote, “that if some of those people who made such noise didn’t look out, they would get turned off the place, just as Venus and her gang got turned off last year.” This was his version of a threat, and he seemed happy with it, writing that the women were only

³²⁵ Towne, *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne*, 154. Edward S. Philbrick to Elizabeth Ware Pearson, Jan. 22, in Pearson, *Letters from Port Royal*, 306.

“trying to play brag” about their work and that “they will all go to work in a few days, I feel sure.”³²⁶

Philbrick’s heavy-handed approach to the women who protested his wages demonstrates the baseline paradox that pervaded the project and kept it from ever measuring up to the refugee crisis of Sherman’s March. The paradox was this: the project’s founding ideas and rationales, its underlying logics, all ran counter the basic spirit of humanitarianism. Instilling such a strong free labor ethic—promoting ideas of thrift, discipline, and the market—all required wielding pain and suffering, or the threat of, as the proverbial sticks that allowed the wage system to work. To eliminate hardship with too much charity or relief was to undermine the basic market logics on which the project had been based. This fundamental tension pressed down on the islands from all angles and was about as ever-present as the changing of the moon. Freed people thus found themselves trapped in a contrived and seemingly endless state of insecurity, perpetually caught in a pinch somewhere between nearly starving and lacking basic needs and working for their freedoms. This in some ways captures why what happened at Port Royal was so needlessly tragic: For as much as the agents wrung their hands over the dire state of affairs, at least some of the suffering remained orchestrated and controlled, the results of a system doing what it was designed to do.

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In March and early April of 1865, the settling of abandoned lands revved into motion. It was in this same period that U.L. Houston launched his expedition out to Skiddaway Island and Tunis Campbell—technically, an agent of the Freedman’s Bureau—journeyed down to St. Catherine’s; but the settlement push was hardly confined to just these two examples. Freed

³²⁶ Ibid, Jan. 9th, 303-304.

people from across the islands began laying their claims to the land, their initial fears assuaged by the formation of the Freedman's Bureau, which signaled that the federal government intended to honor their "possessory" claims and make them permanent. The future, in other words, seemed bright. Despite the death and despair, despite that cold January, the epidemic of February, and those hungry weeks in early March, it looked as if freedom was finally coming within reach. The Port Royal Experiment had also adopted a slightly different vision of itself. Make no mistake, it was still beset by its contradictions. But it was no longer serving as the tip of the spear trying to prod the government into a wider embrace of emancipation; instead, it was now harnessing land policy as a kind of blunt-force mechanism to try and pound out space for a truly radical reconstruction to take hold. Everything centered on land and the kind of future black homesteads could bring.

No one wasted any time. By the first week of April, close to twenty thousand freed people had been settled on about 100,000 acres of land. Edisto was also in the process of being resettled. Most of the initial settlers were those that had originally lived there though hundreds of Georgia refugees joined them as well. For the most part, the basic pattern went something like this: the land nearest to Port Royal—tracts, for example, on St. Helena, Lady's, Hilton Head, and Fripp Island—went to native islanders, many of whom had already laid claims to the land in the auctions of '63 and '64. Some of these families had also already purchased their plots and were therefore legal titleholders. The land further out on the periphery, meanwhile, lands such as the islands south of Charleston or the coastal areas south of Savannah, were typically reserved for refugees and other newcomers. The program had its issues: The lands furthest from Beaufort tended to be rougher and in need of the most work; Saxton's team was under-resourced and under-staffed; and the steady arrival of refugees meant there were always new claimants, which

meant the staff could never get ahead. At one point, they resorted to handing out certificates outlining details of a person's claim just to try and expedite the process. But by the first of June, nearly 40,000 families had been settled on close to 400,000 acres of land, an enormous feat given the circumstances.³²⁷

Fortunes turned, however, in mid-April. On April 9, 1865, after fleeing the siege lines of Petersburg and attempting a break for the Blue Ridge mountains, Robert E. Lee surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia at place called Appomattox. Five days later, on the 14th, the army held its celebratory flag raising over Ft. Sumter. The very next morning, around half-past seven, President Abraham Lincoln was dead, killed by an assassin's bullet; a prominent stage actor named John Wilkes Booth snuck into the president's suite at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. the night before and fired a mortal bullet into the back of Lincoln's skull. Now the manhunt was on: All of Washington searched for assailants; frenzied questions—was the president really dead? Was Jeff Davis involved? One assassin or two? —spun off wild conspiracies; threats of a renewed Confederate invasion lurked behind every corner. A nation just now breathing a sigh of relief suddenly spun off its axis. In less than six days in April, from the 9th to the 15th, the war was won; Lincoln was shot dead; a killer was on the loose; Andrew Johnson was sworn in under state of emergency; and tens-of-thousands of Confederate soldiers started making their long walk home.

The evidence of this last development first appeared on the islands near the end of Spring. Former slaveholders starting filtering back to their old plantations—often without a dollar on them but with big plans for the future. One former planter, a Dr. Clarence Fripp, moved into a home not a stone's throw away from Laura Towne's place on St. Helena. Another moved

³²⁷ See Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule*, 19, 47.

back to Hilton Head but refused to bring his family on account of the northern agents and the freedom freed people now had; the changes repulsed him, and he didn't think them fit for his wife. At first, freed people feigned sympathy for the impoverished state of their former masters and some even tried to help the families that once owned them. But this was partly strategic: Freed people didn't fully trust that the land was theirs and wanted to curry at least a little favor with their former owners, just in case they lost the land and suddenly needed a place to go or somewhere to work. But even then, hardly any freed person did more than talk or offer kind regards. Few, if any, agreed to work for their old masters, despite former masters asking, sometimes begging, and sometimes threatening freed people to sign on. Freed people simply refused.³²⁸

It turned out that those returning planters had a powerful friend in the new president. It makes sense in a way. Andrew Johnson, a Democrat from east Tennessee, was chosen as Lincoln's vice-president only out of an appeal to unity and because Johnson was the one Southern Senator not to withdraw from Congress back in 1861 (*just imagine the uproar today were a president to die in office and the person succeeding him or her was a member of the opposing party*). But that's not all there is to say about our seventeenth president, for Andrew Johnson was also a drunken fool, who showed up to Lincoln's Second Inaugural deep down in his cups; he was apparently in such a wobbly stupor he could barely perform his part of the proceedings. Still, drunkard or not, Johnson was a master of east Tennessee stump politics. He effused democratic populism and cut his political teeth championing the common man, partly because he himself was quite a common man: He had apprenticed as a tailor, was illiterate until adulthood when his wife taught him to read, and though he had once owned slaves, as a small

³²⁸ See Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 347-348.

farmer, he abhorred those west Tennessee planters and their garish homes, their gargantuan estates, and their expensive tastes. Yet as much as he hated big-wig planters, he hated their slaves more.³²⁹

Though Johnson had initially promised to “make treason odious,” sometime around mid-summer he changed his mind. His true colors came out. Instead of making good on his pledge, he began pardoning ex-Confederates at an impressive clip. Granted, Lincoln had signaled a preference for leniency before his death and had previewed a general proclamation of amnesty for those willing to take an oath of allegiance. But Johnson took the pardons to another level. He kept many of Lincoln’s exemptions in place—which denied amnesty, for example, to high-ranking officials, generals, etc.—and even added a new exemption for Confederates who owned over \$20,000 in property. But so long as those people applied for a pardon and sufficiently groveled at his feet, he typically acquitted them. They just had to pledge their loyalty to the U.S., accept defeat, and accept that slavery had been abolished. By June of the following year, Johnson had issued over 12,000 pardons; people quite literally lined up outside the White House for a chance to plead their case. Worst of all, part of receiving a pardon, in Johnson’s mind, was having one’s property (excepting slaves) restored, which opened a door for ex-Confederates to reclaim their land.³³⁰

The first battle over post-war land claims happened in September on Edisto Island. By then, Johnson’s pardoning spree was in full-swing. Ex-Confederates demanded their land back, and Johnson informed O.O. Howard, the head of the Freedman’s Bureau, that, where possible, he intended on restoring Confederate property. It was Howard’s job, he said, to break the news and

³²⁹ See Eric. L. McKittrick, *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

³³⁰ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 246-249.

broker an arrangement between freed people and the restored landholders. Howard bristled at thought of it. For what it's worth, neither he nor Stanton wanted to see the property turned over; Stanton had told several of the teachers on the islands that "it would be thousand years before the rebels re-possessed the lands if he had his way." Rufus Saxton had also been raising a ruckus. Much as he had done during the land auctions of '63 and '64, he appended protests in his official reports demanding that the government stand by its promise. To him, Sherman's original order was as "binding as a statute," and he argued that the government had a duty to honor its promises. But Johnson, a one-time Tennessee slaveholder, had all the power. So in September of 1865, Howard had no choice but to go south, first to Edisto, and tell freed families that the land was no longer theirs, that they needed to consider signing onto rental agreements or labor contracts.³³¹

Howard had been backed up against a wall. Earlier that summer he released a document known as Circular 13, which instructed Bureau agents to start settling freed people on land as fast as possible. He could see where Johnson was going, and the circular was his attempt to get out ahead of the president's plans for restoration. Johnson, however, caught wind of the circular and had Howard write a new one. Known as Circular 15, this was the document that marked the government's initial retreat from land reform on the Sea Islands. It was, in Howard's view, a compromise measure: He described it as a "conditional plan" to restore Confederate property only after the ex-Confederates set aside lands for freed people to work as their own. It turned out to be anything but a 'compromise.' Not only did the plan place the onus for allocating lands on the ex-Confederates, the same people that had just taken up arms against the U.S. and had enslaved the freed people not long ago, it also implicitly drew back from the idea that the freed

³³¹ See Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule*, 52-55. See also, Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 354-355. Quotes from Rose, 366; Oubre, 51.

people had an affirmative right to the land. Howard truly saw the circular as a compromise, a kind-of best deal available given the circumstances, but it was an ominous first sign that land reform was a losing hand.³³²

The backlash was understandably swift and intense. Freed people on Edisto—many of whom had been evacuated from the island in 1863 and were finally back in their homes—erupted in protest. They objected to everything Howard said, with a chorus of voices telling him that they would never work for their masters again. Then they got organized. A committee of three—Henry Brown, Ishmael Moultrie, and Yates Sampson—spoke with Howard privately. They told him that they wanted land, that they wanted homesteads, and that the present situation threatened to make them “landless and homeless.” “This,” they said, “is not the condition of really free men.” One even told Howard that while the general could perhaps forgive the men who took his arm, he could never forgive “the man who tied me to a tree and gave me 39 lashes[;] who stripped and flogged my mother & sister & who will not let me stay in his empty hut except [unless] I do [h]is planting & be satisfied with his price...” He then said that even if he could forgive his former master, he was sure his ex-master would only conspire against him. This is why they needed land, they said, so that they could be neither slaves “nor compelled to work for those who would treat us as such.”³³³

Next, the committee of three took what they said to Howard, added more, and wrote it all down in a petition sent to President Johnson. It read in part: “This is our home. We have made [t]hese lands what they are...[W]e have been always ready to strike for [l]iberty and humanity, yea to fight if need be [t]o preserve this glorious Union. Shall not we who [a]re freedmen [sic]

³³² See McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather*, 130-133; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 159-161.

³³³ Quoted from Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule*, 53.

and have been always true to this Union have the same rights as are enjoyed by [o]thers? Have we broken any laws of these United States? Have we forfeited our rights of property [i]n land— If not[,] then, are not our rights as [a] free people and good citizens of these United States [t]o be considered before the rights of those who were [f]ound in rebellion against this good and just government [?]” The petition went on to say that no one objected to purchasing the land and that they would buy it if they needed to. After all, no one needed all that much. Just a home and a few acres, they said, insisting that after being encouraged to take up homesteads, that’s exactly what they had done and with great success. Thus as “freedmen of this [i]sland and of the state of South Carolina,” they therefore looked to the U.S. government for “protection and equal rights” and asked for the “privilege of [p]urchasing” their own homesteads “right here in the [h]eart of South Carolina.”³³⁴

The petition did nothing but fall on deaf ears. Johnson likely never read it. It probably wouldn’t have mattered if he did. By the fall of 1865, he was dead set on rolling back the repercussions of the war and thwarting the pace of change. And at the time, Johnson had extraordinary power to do so because of a minor detail of major significance: Congress wasn’t in session. In the mid-nineteenth century, Congress didn’t meet in several sessions throughout the year as it does today; distances were far too great and roads far too poor. Instead, Congress convened once a year in a marathon-like session that could last anywhere from three to six months depending on the term. It just so happened that in 1865, the thirty eighth congress, which passed both the Thirteenth Amendment and the Freedman’s Bureau Bill in the same session, adjourned in March while the next session wasn’t slated to begin until the following December, some nine months later. This wide legislative vacuum in the spring, summer, and fall of 1865

³³⁴ Ibid, 54.

gave Johnson—again, a Southern Democrat—the full range of keys to the federal government. And unlike his predecessor, who consistently rose to the occasion and evolved as the nation evolved, Johnson proved about as pig-headed as they come and moved only to sink down into depths of his glass.

The trio of Stanton, Howard, and Saxton, however, recognized Johnson's intentions early and hatched a plot of their own. To be fair, though, calling it a plot may overstate the elaborateness of their plans: they simply stalled, obstructed, and did their best to keep the wolves at bay. When there were legal appeals to make, they made them; when there was no other option but restore tracts of land, they did so but re-claimed others and tried to re-locate families elsewhere (in October, for instance, they restored eighty plantations to their original owners but claimed another thirty-six). Where there was slightest room to maneuver—whether it was in slowing how fast lands were restored, helping freed people buy more land outright, or mucking up negotiations—they did what they could. Howard was especially bothered with his role in the restorations and promised the people of Edisto that he would do everything in his power to make sure they kept the land. The idea was to gum up the works just long enough for Congress to come back in session by the end of the year and hopefully step in— ideally by re-authorizing the Freedman's Bureau for at least another year and beefing up its mandate to include an enlarged set of powers.³³⁵

But Congress doesn't always work as it should. Though there was some support for providing freed people with the land they were promised, a bill for re-licensing the Freedman's Bureau didn't come to the floor until the first of the year. It took nearly a month to debate. The final vote came on January 25, 1866. It passed and went to the president for his approval on

³³⁵ See *Ibid.*, 56. Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 351-352. See McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather*, 146.

February 13th. Johnson sent it back to a stunned Senate six days later with a shocking veto. He refused to sign, and his reasoning was as one might expect from a conservative like Johnson: he argued that it was too expensive, that it favored Blacks over Whites, that it grew the size of the government, and that it infringed on the rights of both individuals and states; in his mind, the war was over, slavery had been abolished, the states were all back in the Union, and there was nothing more to do. The veto though was as much about sending a message as it was about stopping any one piece of legislation. It was him basically throwing down the gauntlet and inviting congress into east Tennessee-style cage-match over who would control Reconstruction: the President or Congress?

The wrangling over Johnson's veto through the spring of 1866 doomed the prospects of trying to stall, stall, and stall some more. Congress dithered. It let the issue sit, and when it finally bucked up the audacity and will-power to override Johnson's veto, it was already mid-July. By then hundreds of plantations had been restored, and everything—all the momentum, all the legal challenges, all the realities on the ground—tilted back toward the planters. The first major shoe to drop came earlier in January of 1866, just as the Bureau's renewal went to the floor, when Johnson removed Rufus Saxton from his post. Saxton had become a nuisance to the president. He had refused to turn over land issued in Sherman's order, and so Johnson sacked him to get him out of the way. After spending three years on the islands and doing much to champion the rights of freed people to the land, Saxton was officially going home, which removed the freed people's most consistent and credible ally. Even worse, with Saxton gone, the job of adjudicating and enforcing land claims fell to the more traditional military forces in the

area, which meant that pretty soon freed people who refused to comply would be driven off the islands under arms.³³⁶

It is perhaps this moment—the late winter and early spring of 1866—that the great refugee movement of Sherman’s March truly ended. When Johnson removed Saxton and gave the army clearance to start pushing people off the land, the Georgia refugees were some of the first ones displaced. Unlike those native to the coast and unlike the original freed people at Port Royal, many of whom had already purchased homesteads or had solid land claims, the refugees had comparatively weaker claims to the land and were thus left stranded in the breach. Moreover, these were people with no-existing relationship to the planters who were returning; no real, earthbound attachment to the land, as they might their own homes; and perhaps no friends or family. Most were likely miles away from their traditional networks of support, miles away from the lands they once knew, and miles away from any local connections that might help them navigate the uncharted waters ahead. So, they left. Not everyone, mind you, but for the most part, instead of signing on to labor contracts the Sherman refugees set out on a new and dispiriting journey back to Georgia.³³⁷

Efforts to stem the tide and reverse course on the land restorations received what looked like one last boost when Congress finally passed the new Freedman’s Bureau Bill in July of 1866. However, the new bill wasn’t quite what most hoped it would be. Instead of offering a blanket provision securing titles to the original Sherman land, instead of halting restoration outright, and instead of finding a way to make wide-spread land reform possible, the bill moved in the opposite direction. While it offered freed people a chance to purchase land, it limited the

³³⁶ See Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule*, 59; Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 357-358.

³³⁷ See Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 357.

land available for purchase to twenty acres a piece, half of the original forty; it also mandated that those purchasing the land lease it for a fixed term, ostensibly to prove they could successfully farm it and pay their bills. It also—and this is most critical—made no concessions to those that had lost land through the restoration process. The central issue roiling the islands was basically ignored. So while this second Freedman’s Bureau Bill previewed the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and offered landmark protections in the realm of legal and civil rights, when it came to land, the bill all but waved the white flag, signaling that the federal government didn’t have the stomach for real reform. Even after a veto, an over-ride, and a congressional rebuke, Johnson still won.³³⁸

This wasn’t quite yet the end of the struggle over land though. Freed people mounted resistance throughout the year. Communities got organized by holding rallies and meetings, which kept folks updated on the latest news; at one point in 1865, some of the islands like Edisto formed their own freed police forces to try and stave off intervention, though most of these ceased to exist by the end of 1866; and at various other times, the resistance spilled out into threats and absolute refusals to leave. The rice swamps of Georgia and South Carolina were where local resistance came closest to rebellion. In early 1867, a reported three hundred freed people occupied two large rice plantations on the Savannah River, an overt act of protest that brought out a regiment of the U.S. army and was subdued only after the troops opened fire. Several months later, an African American lawyer-turned-activist named Aaron Alpeoria (A.A.) Bradley, organized a rally meant to coincide with Georgia’s Constitutional Convention. Rally-goers flooded the halls with placards demanding everything from “homesteads for all men” to “Equal Political Rights” to “relief from Debt” to even an eight-hour work day. The signs were

³³⁸ See Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 374. See also, Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction*, 80, 85.

symbols of an ongoing movement, an effort to retain the hard-fought gains won from the war; but by focusing on debt, rent, and working conditions, they were also signs of a political window that had practically closed. By the winter of 1867, the initial dream of owning land had largely been lost.³³⁹

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It's tragic but true. After marching for the better part of three months through the thick Georgia countryside, after crossing rivers and streams and eluding Confederate patrols, after shivering through the winter and foraging off the land, after arriving in Savannah and surviving those death-filled days at Port Royal, the story of the Georgia refugees ends with them making a long walk home. But it's not that they walked home that's so tragic; it's that they walked home perhaps alone, empty handed, and no more certain of freedom than they were when they left. The great dream of one day owning land and the independence that came with it ran aground on the shoals around Port Royal; the sense of hope and excitement that was so alive in the Savannah winter dissipated by the first of spring; and the great efforts they had all made to define freedom and make it more meaningful while on the March now seemed like the opening line in a story that somehow went wrong. The great day of Jubilee had indeed arrived, freedom had certainly come, but the most tragic part of the story is that by the aftermath of the March, it was as if it had already come and gone.

³³⁹ See Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction*, 99-100.

Epilogue

Much of this dissertation's narrative purpose has been to explain why the March mattered. Yet here, in a brief phrase, is why the March mattered most of all: "I was born a slave and became free after Sherman's army came through," said Primus Wilson, a freed person from Savannah. "I was born in Tattnall County, State of Georgia, a slave, and remained so till the Yankee army came to Savannah," explained Boson Johnson, a freed person from Liberty County. Scipio King likewise testified that he was born a slave but added, "I was freed when Sherman's army came through." Cato Keating said the same. Years after the war while speaking to an agent of the Southern Claims Commission, he narrated his personal history, saying "I was

born a slave and became free after Sherman's army came through." This common refrain—"I was born a slave till the army came"—captures America's rebirth, our pivot from slavery to freedom, and the lasting legacy of our Civil War. It also captures in the clearest, most succinct way possible why the March lives on and why the story of American freedom runs through Atlanta, Savannah, and the islands along the coast.³⁴⁰

These refrains are also reflections. Primus Wilson, Boson Johnson, Scipio King, and Cato Keating each told their stories sometime in the early 1870s, some five-plus years after the war and well after the March had ended. By then, the nation had come out of the Johnson years and experienced a flowering of rights and freedoms rivaled by few periods in our history. Congressional Reconstruction—otherwise known as Radical Reconstruction—began in waning days of 1866. Outraged by Johnson's veto of the Freedmen's Bureau Bill as well as his veto of the Civil Rights Act of 1866, Republicans in Congress reasserted control over Reconstruction after gaining the requisite two-thirds majority in the mid-term elections of that year. They tried (and failed) to impeach Johnson, expelled ex-Confederates from Congress, and hit reset on the entire process. Where Johnson was willing to let Southern states re-join the Union without consequence or penalty, Congressional republicans divided them into military districts, appointed military governors, and outlined a step-by-step process through which states could officially rejoin.³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ Claim of Primus Wilson, Southern Claims Commission, Allowed Claims, 1871-1880, Chatham County, Georgia; Claim of Boson Johnson, Southern Claims Commission, Allowed Claims, 1871-1880, Liberty County, Georgia; Claim of Scipio King, Southern Claims Commission, Allowed Claims, 1871-1880, Liberty County, Georgia; Claim of Cato Keating, Southern Claims Commission, Allowed Claims, 1871-1880, Chatham County, Georgia.

³⁴¹ See Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction remade the Constitution* (New York: Norton, 2019).

Alongside this clampdown of Congressional control, Republicans in Congress authored the most critical piece of legislation in American history. The Thirteenth Amendment—the first of the so-called Reconstruction Amendments—had been ratified in 1865, and in 1867, congress tried to resolve the challenges of emancipation by passing a Fourteenth Amendment, which contained expansive provisions staking out an American position on civil rights. It's citizenship clause defined citizenship for the first time ever, granting birthright citizenship to anyone born in America (except, ironically, native Americans). It ensured citizens the right to both due process and equal protection under the law, and it protected privileges and immunities, making it so that states couldn't interfere with the rights of national citizenship. It also in a roundabout and somewhat convoluted way guaranteed all men the right to vote regardless of color. Doing so required a bit of political wiggling, but Republicans nonetheless included a provision stipulating that if states denied any male of eligible age access to the ballot, it would risk losing proportional representation in Congress—which was Congress's way of ensuring voting rights by wielding a big and powerful stick.³⁴²

The result was a groundbreaking moment of bi-racial democracy. In the elections of 1868, the first to include Black voters, African Americans went to the polls in incredible numbers. They elected state-wide legislators, state officials, and local leaders, including city commissioners and justices of the peace; they served as delegates to state constitutional conventions. Backed by institutions like the Republican Party, the U.S. army, and local Union Leagues, a grassroots organization that mobilized Republican voters, African Americans became a force in Southern politics, and it didn't end there. In the elections of 1870 and 1872, voters

³⁴² Ibid.

would elect small cohorts of African Americans to the U.S. House of Representatives, and in 1871, Hiram R. Revels of Mississippi was sworn in as the first African American to sit in the U.S. Senate. Everywhere across the South the political landscape had changed, creating for the first time an active democracy in which African Americans had a loud and sometimes decisive voice.³⁴³

Socially, some of the changes were just as great. While thousands of formerly enslaved people saw the dream of land ownership slip from their grasp, in some pockets Black landownership flourished. Freed towns—sometimes known as freedmen’s towns—sprang up as independent communities; cities like Charleston and New Orleans witnessed the emergence of an urban and propertied elite. Most of all, however, schools spread like wildfire. State legislatures established formal systems of public education. Freedmen’s schools which had operated on an *ad hoc* basis during the war blossomed into formal centers of education. Thousands of African American teachers spread across the South, sometimes teaching in primary and secondary schools and sometimes teaching night classes for eager adults or training other teachers. And with the support organizations like the American Missionary Association and the Freedmen’s Bureau, some of the first historically black colleges and universities—including Fisk, Howard, and others—opened their doors for the very first time, welcoming some of the first cohorts of black college graduates. Some state universities like the University of South Carolina even for a brief period welcomed integrated classes.³⁴⁴

³⁴³ See Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

³⁴⁴ See Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007). See also, Hilary Green, *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2016).

Yet this period of rapid social and political change wouldn't last. Starting in the early 1870s, as more southern states returned to white home rule, ex-Confederates launched a counter-revolution designed to roll-back the transformations that came out of the war. Fueled by torrents of violence, led by former generals and Confederate soldiers, and aimed at restoring white supremacy in the South's social and political life, this reactionary wave whittled away at Reconstruction until it finally capsized completely. It didn't help that as night-riding vigilantes terrorized Black voters and ex-Confederates wrestled back control of state governments the white North retreated from Reconstruction. The pangs of the war, the power of sectional reconciliation, and the pervasive character of American racism all proved inimical to lasting change. Those same Northern constituencies that once celebrated the war and embraced emancipation eventually turned their back on the programs meant to reform Southern society and sold-out freed people in the process. The last act in this sordid drama came in 1876. In an attempt to settle a disputed presidential election, the Republican winner, Rutherford B. Hayes, removed the federal troops from the South, which ended federal oversight and put a final, inglorious end to Reconstruction.³⁴⁵

In all this time land never really re-entered the equation. Beyond those initial attempts to settle freed people on new homesteads in 1865 and 1866, the urgency of land reform as both a federal prerogative and a matter of reparative justice fell by the wayside. Congressional power brokers considered it politically impossible and treated it as low-order priority. Indeed, if a guiding idea ruled Reconstruction, it was never necessarily that of restoring justice so much as

³⁴⁵ See David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War and American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). Carol Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015). Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

establishing citizenship, of granting civil and political rights, and of reconstructing our national body politic. As such, notions that fell outside this general framework—ideas about economic justice, material security, and a basic right to the land—lost their political currency. Thus after a war in which ideas of freedom collided on battlefields, plantations, and alongside lines of marching soldiers, Reconstruction ended the debate. It defined freedom within the bounds of the state, leaving the promise of Jubilee, the promise of a wider, more meaningful freedom, largely unfulfilled.

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This brings us back to the March and its legacy. As a matter of sheer force, Sherman's March through Georgia made this redefinition of American freedom possible. It was as if two great forces met and converged. The army and all its sixty thousand-plus marching soldiers stomped out the dying embers of a slave regime, and through the sum of their individual movements, freed people made this new idea of freedom a central consequence of the campaign. One fueled the other, and in tandem, these two forces combined at the end of the war to make the War of the Rebellion more than just a war between two sections, or a war that would end slavery, but a war that would shape the meaning of freedom for the next century or more, a war, if you will, for an American Jubilee. In the end, that—not the burning of Atlanta, or Sherman's tactics, or Sherman himself, not the grievances of the white South, and certainly not the question of "Total War"—is *why* and *how* we should remember the March, for like Yorktown or Gettysburg or Selma, Alabama, Sherman's March to the Sea was a landmark moment in the history of American freedom.

But at the expense of sounding inconsistent, if the March was a great watershed, it was also a missed opportunity. The freedom it produced was never that conclusive. Freed refugees

suffered at Port Royal; the idea of meaningful land reform went out with the war; and the winds of change that were alive in that long Savannah winter eventually died out. The March created space for people to imagine a more expansive freedom and turned the nation toward a free future, but because Sherman preferred being a flywheel to a mainspring, because soldiers turned freed people away out on the main road, and because no one stopped to listen to the freed refugees or see the world as they did, this more expansive vision of freedom never got the affirmation it needed. As a result, the Jubilee came and went with few of its promises in place, making the months and years following the March seem at times less like a great dawning of freedom and more like an early eclipse. Despite our wishes to the contrary, this unresolved story is a legacy too.



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