

A conference sponsored by the American Historical Association and the National Museum of African American History and Culture with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and HISTORY™

The Future of the African American Past

May 19-21, 2016
Washington, DC

“Between Slavery and Freedom”: Rethinking the Slaves’ War

Thavolia Glymph, Duke University

Available online at <https://futureafampast.si.edu/conference-papers>
© Do not cite or circulate without the author’s permission

NMAAHC/AHA Conference: The Future of the African American Past
May 19-21, 2016
Washington, DC

“Between Slavery and Freedom”: Rethinking the Slaves’ War
Thavolia Glymph
Duke University

... black intellectuals as ordinary folk alike believed that their historical experience mattered, that it made them who they were.

Thomas Holt

On a Baltimore street corner in February 1861, two black women were overheard discussing the state of the Union. “Wait till the fourth of March,” one of them reportedly announced, “and then won’t I slap my missus’ face!” March 4, 1861, of course was no date snatched out of thin air. It was the date Lincoln was to be inaugurated and in that event the “two negresses” saw the opening of new political space in the war against slavery. In contrast to the war President Lincoln prepared to lead, to reunite the nation as a slave country, they readied to be among black Marylanders who “made no detour through the middle ground” and had no “doubt, from the beginning of hostilities, where the central issue lay.”¹ By the time the slaveholders’ rebellion had been put down, the slaves’ war had suffered massive defeats to be sure, but there were also victories, large and small victories that cumulatively signaled the remapping of the political landscape of the United States.

In 1864, when Cilinda Johnson’s name appeared on a wartime federal roll with the description, “Citizen, Colored,” it registered a small but significant victory.

The Fourteenth Amendment was still four years away but it still meant something that in 1864, an agent of the federal government listed her as a citizen. It signaled just how far the war to put down the slaveholders' rebellion had come, the Union war had been transformed, and the part people like Cilinda Johnson who by the hundreds of thousands had led to Union lines and thereby placed themselves on the Union's wartime agenda and forced a merger of the Union war and the slaves' war.²

Slave resistance in support of emancipation and the Union redirected the course of the war and the process of emancipation and Reconstruction. Lincoln admitted as much in his famous letter to the citizens of Springfield, Illinois Ohio who opposed the Emancipation Proclamation. They could fight on "exclusively to save the Union," he admonished them. But he also reminded them that he had issued the proclamation to aid them "in saving the Union." Lincoln was referring specifically to the role of black soldiers. Their service and their freedom were inextricably linked, he emphasized, and he would not take that back. "The party who could elect a President on a War & Slavery Restoration platform," he wrote, "would, of necessity, lose the colored force; and that force being lost, would be as powerless to save the Union as to do any other impossible thing."³

In time, Lincoln's administration increasingly understood as well that the mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters of black soldiers and laborers would have to be offered the same deal—freedom. Union military commanders learned that it was easier to recruit black soldiers and labor battalions if they offered refuge to the men's wives and children. "When negro women and children are left behind," General Sherman wrote when requesting 200 black laborers in November 1862,

“they become a fruitful source of trouble.” To solve the problem, he asked that the families of the black military laborers be given transportation to Cairo. The wives and children of black soldiers continued to face harrowing circumstances but the acknowledgement represented a significant admission.

Over the past four decades, scholars have demolished the long-standing historiography that portrayed slavery as a benevolent institution and sidelined the contributions slaves made to Union victory and the destruction of slavery.⁴ No one today would write as Robert S. Cotterill, a founding member of the Southern Historical Association, did in 1937 when he offered that the slave’s “working hours were long but not strenuous” and “from the psychological side, since he had never known freedom, he looked upon slavery not as a degradation but as a routine.” That the notion that slavery was “a mercy,” as John C. Calhoun put it, continues to have its adherents is a different problem..

Yet, despite the large body of revisionist scholarship that has countered such views and explored in fine and even profane and gritty detail the nature and process of the making of freedom, the question of what former slaves actually got once the long battle for freedom was won—what freedom meant—has returned as a hotly contested question. It has led some historians to conclude that the historiographical turn in the scholarship, beginning largely in the 1970s, that emphasized black agency and cultural resistance went too far.⁵ Not only, they suggest, did black slave culture do more to support the institution of slavery than help black people survive but black people emerged from the Civil War so damaged

that they could hardly stand on the ground of freedom (if they lived to see it).⁶ I think we need to take a step back.

Certainly, the slow and often tepid response of Lincoln's administration to the humanitarian crisis surrounding black refugees and wartime slave resistance generally, represented huge obstacles in slaves' bid for freedom and contributed, wittingly and unwittingly, to the violence and protracted nature of emancipation.⁷ Yet, the federal government's decision to embrace emancipation, tepidly or not, marked a major breach in the nation's commitment to slavery. No less importantly, a point overlooked or simply taken for granted, the vast majority of former slaves did live to see freedom. And, the wars black people waged before and during the Civil War grounded black radical politics that informed the postwar struggles.⁸ On this point, Thomas Holt argues compelling, "if the master confronted the slave from the safety of a mobilized white political community . . . the slaves stared back from the slave quarters that were also mobilized, however brutalized and ravaged by the slave trade and arbitrary rule."⁹

African Americans suffered greatly and died in unprecedented numbers between 1862 and 1865 and during Reconstruction. That fact, however, is not all of the story. Enslaved people knew something about resistance and revolution and its cost. They expected to have to fight for their freedom. They expected that the brutality that accompanied the making of slavery would accompany its undoing. They knew many would suffer and die before any of them experienced freedom, that their families, despite their best efforts, would again be torn apart. As they fled alone to Union Lines, in family units, or as communities to Union lines or resisted

from within Confederate lines, they knew they were in “for harder times,” one Union officer wrote.

The 150th anniversary of the Civil War has now passed and scholarly and public attention has turned to Reconstruction. The question of what freedom meant—or how freed people navigated the in-between space of slavery and freedom—links both commemorations and remains unfinished business. Civil War refugee camps are one place where we might take the temperature of this question. The wartime history of enslaved women as fugitives and wartime refugees, their lives in refugee camps, and experience of re-enslavement and punitive federal policies are critical to understanding the in-between spaces of slavery and freedom and postwar resistance and activism.

Civil War refugee camp were spaces of trauma, containment, discipline, and surveillance. They were sites where notions of racial purity and pollution gained new traction. Here, we might extend backward Steven Hahn’s critical intervention about the ways in which “languages of ‘civilizationism’ and of race and racial prospect resonated with one another and then contributed to the logic and choreography of both reservations and segregation.”¹⁰ Important antecedents to the trans-Mississippi West “proving ground” are to be found in Civil War refugee camps. Some of the men who would play leading roles in the war against Native Americans in the West and their encampment received their basic training during the Civil War as “overseers” and managers of Civil War refugee camps where ideas about racial containment, contamination, and colonization circulated freely.

Lincoln’s long-held belief that the best solution to the problem of free black people

in a white republic was colonization was echoed on the Civil War battlefield. Agents of freedmen's aid societies and Union commanders used the language of colonization in addressing the problem of black freedom.¹¹ Many refugee camps were indeed called colonies.¹²

Black women in refugee camps fought mightily against these ideas and worked to ensure that more people made it to freedom than died. These would be tragic losses to be sure and they had long-term economic, political, social, and psychological consequences. There would be refugees like Margaret Ferguson who arrived at a freedmen's hospital emaciated with a gangrened leg and foot and an exposed and partially destroyed tibia who died after having her leg amputated. There would be women like Missouri Lewis who could not see beyond the camps and chose to abort the babies they carried. These were hard decisions that make sense only in the context of the hard road to freedom. They are not the kind of decisions revisionist historical scholarship typically celebrates. Some historians ask us to see Ferguson's lost leg as symbolic of a damaged and lost people, as proof of the need to temper our judgment that freedom was liberating. But, I think, we ought to proceed with great caution. How do we weigh these losses against the success of black women like Emeline Anderson who made it possible for black women refugees to survive the camps and reconstitute families and communities? Where do we place women like Anna Ashby who, born a slave in Kentucky, who had by 1870 had survived a labor camp and joined the exodus to Leavenworth, Kansas with her husband and children.

In sum, the losses and violence black people suffered during the war mattered. It also mattered that they came on the heels of a centuries-long business model in the United States that had fostered and celebrated the “unfathering, unmothering, misnaming” of enslaved people.¹³ Emancipation did not end this kind of violence but it did mandate that the nation define freedom anew. Like all wars, the Civil War generated misery and death and did not leave untouched noncombatants without arms or the kind of battlefield plans honed through the professional study of military tactics and the history of warfare. Making freedom was undeniably difficult and deadly work but we risk doing a fundamental disservice to the difference freedom made when we make a hard turn in a direction that suggests it accomplished too little to much matter.

There had been other wars over slavery, other places where slavery’s destruction was achieved through force of arms, other places where the process of emancipation was prolonged and bitterly contested, other places where war generated refugees and atrocities, and where slaveholders were forced to their knees, and more in the years to come. The American Civil War was not exceptional in these regards but the history of the slaves’ war within the Civil War remains to be fully told and integrated into the historiography. When, for example, we place the American Civil War not only within a global, comparative, and transnational context, but within the long history of refugees and refugee camps, the history of the making of freedom in the United States inevitably becomes more legible. The effort to remake democracy in America during Reconstruction suffered huge defeats but the world the slaveholders made did cease to be because “ordinary people ... did

extraordinary things under the most difficult circumstances and, in the process, transformed themselves and the world in which they lived.”¹⁴ Under no other circumstances could we imagine the “hungry and disfranchised Confederates” who went “down into the land [of Egypt] for corn for their wives and little ones.”

Enslaved in the border state of Missouri though only 60 miles from the Union stronghold at St. Louis, Louisa Alexander was outside the freedom borders drawn the Emancipation Proclamation. Her freedom, she wrote her husband, would only come “at the point of the Bayonet,” a resolution she welcomed. As Ira Berlin reminds us, “The demise of slavery was not so much a proclamation as a movement; not so much an occasion as a complex history with multiple players and narratives.”¹⁵ We are still missing much of that complex history.

¹ Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, 1985), 92.

² W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York, 1935); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York, 1988), see especially 1-11; Fields, *Slavery on the Middle Ground*; Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

³ A. Lincoln to Hon. Charles D. Robinson, August 17, 1864, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 7, p. 501.

⁴ See, for example, U. B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1918); R. S. Cotterill, *The Old South: The Geographic, Economic, Social, Political, and Cultural Expansion, Institutions, and Nationalism in the Ante-Bellum South* (Glendale, CA., 1937); Walter L. Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (New York, 1905); William Dunning, Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era* (Cambridge, Mass., 1929); E. Merton Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (Baton Rouge, 1947); James G. Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 1937); H.E. Sterkx, *Partners in Rebellion: Alabama Women in the Civil War* (Rutherford, NJ, 1970).

⁵ The historiographical turn is associated, for example, with the work of John Blasingame, Sterling Stuckey, George Rawick, and Lawrence Levine. W. E. B. Du Bois, of course, had decades before established the centrality of black resistance in

the Civil War to emancipation and the course of the larger struggle for Union. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York, 1935).

⁶ See, for example, Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, 2014), xviii. On the punishing impact of the making of freedom, see for example, Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 2012) and Susan Eva O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge, MA, 2007) and more recently, Carole Emberton, "Unwriting the Freedom Narrative: A Review Essay," *Journal of Southern History* 83 (May 2016): 377-94.

⁷ See, for example, James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York, 2013), 393-429.

⁸ See, for example, Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," *Public Culture* 7 (Fall 1994): 1994(107-46); Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill, 2009) and Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York, 2012).

⁹ Thomas C. Holt, *Children of Fire: A History of African Americans* (New York, 2010), 146.

¹⁰ Steven Hahn, "Slave Emancipation, Indian People, and the Projects of a New American Nation-State," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 3 (September 2013), 324.

¹¹ See, for example, Sherman to Thomas Ewing, Memphis, Aug. 10, 1862 in Brooks D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin, eds. *Sherman's Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 263-64.

¹² The Rost Home Colony was one such camp.

¹³ Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), 194.

¹⁴ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), 1. See also pp. 13-215. See also Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill, 2000) and Foner, *Reconstruction*, 602-12.

¹⁵ Ira Berlin, *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015), 8-9.