

False Freedom: Union Paternalistic Attitudes in Nashville's Contraband Camps during the Civil War

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I. Introduction

As Union forces continued to secure victories in the Western Theatre of the American Civil War, one question persisted, particularly in Tennessee: what was to be done with all the liberated slaves? Slaves would not be formally freed in Tennessee until the Battle of Nashville in 1864, and even then, the integration of freedmen into the rebuilding South proved to be a daunting task. Most prominent and immediate movement towards that end was the development of contraband camps -- so named because slaves were still considered by the Union to be "contraband" confiscated from the South during the war. However, with the chronic underfunding and lack of care put into these camps, the contraband slaves in Tennessee suffered an existence so miserable at the refugee encampments that freedmen were little better off with the Union forces than they were in Southern plantations (Lovett, 1976). Regardless, the captured points in Tennessee quickly became meccas for thousands of slaves seeking protection from their masters, particularly in Memphis after the 1862 Battle of Memphis and Nashville after the 1864 Battle of Nashville (Waller, 1984). This simultaneous conglomeration of economically and socially disenfranchised freedmen throughout the end of the Civil War and during Reconstruction continues to shape how these communities operate within the South today. This paper seeks to show how, although the Union's treatment of freedmen was marginally better than the South, their failures to adequately provide Black people in contraband camps with proper resources, combined

with the latent paternalistic attitudes of Northerners, meant that freedmen were not liberated so much as taken from the hands of one group of masters and placed into the hands of another. This Northern failure was directly responsible for the asymmetric development of Black and white communities during and after the war in Tennessee and can still be seen in the development of Nashville's Black population.

II. Foundations of Contraband Camps and Fort Negley

In order to understand the influence of contraband camps on Nashville's development, it is first important to understand the foundations of contraband camps themselves. While Tennessee was a Confederate state whose economic and social conditions were entrenched with the institution of slavery, the question of abolition had long been a contentious one within antebellum Tennessee political culture. Vocal segments of the population strongly opposed the imprisonment of Black people and were in favor of emancipating slaves and allowing them to emigrate to Africa (Lovett, 1982). Their efforts to grow the population of free Black people were successful. By the start of the Civil War, free Black people comprised 1% of Tennessee's overall population and 5% of the population of Nashville (Lovett, 1976). Legislatively, however, those in power recognized that slavery was the underpinning of the Tennessee economy, and further worried about the agitation that might be caused by free Black people. When writing the new state constitution just prior to the start

of war, Tennessee included clauses specifically enshrining slavery as permanently legal, shutting down any institutional ways for slavery to be phased out (Franklin & Block 2020). This pressure only worsened at the start of the Civil War. Most Tennessee slave owners held an attitude of racial paternalism towards their slaves. They believed Black people to be inherently “lazy, stupid, and unfortunate beings” (Lovett, 1976, p. 36), who, without their masters and mistresses to care for them, were doomed to perish. In reality, the situation was reversed; planters were utterly dependent on Black labor for the persistence of their economic model. When war broke out, most Tennesseans either believed their slaves would remain steadfastly loyal to their masters or were frightened by the idea of emancipation and spread false stories of Union barbarism, even going so far as to call the Union army cannibals (Lovett, 1982) to convince their slaves to remain with them (O’Brien, 1981). At the same time, military duty was a very dangerous undertaking, and many slave owners were resistant to the idea of sending their expensive slaves off to battle (Lovett, 1982). Confederate generals themselves were hesitant to use slaves or free and captured Black people for important missions like supply runs, since Black people were far more likely to be deserters or Union spies. The ensuing efforts to impress Black laborers into the military by the Tennessee General Assembly were half-hearted and doomed to failure (Lovett, 1976). This paradoxical treatment of Black people, combined with unassuaged abolition sentiment, culminated in a mass exodus in the early stages of the war. As soon as federal forces began their invasion of the South, slaves abandoned their masters and fled in droves to Union occupied towns (Cimprich 1980).

When Union General Ulysses S. Grant began his foray into Tennessee in early 1862 via Clarksville, his army was quickly flooded with refugee slaves making a break for the border and hoping the Union army would liberate them (Szcondronski, 2013). The Union had not yet developed an official federal policy concerning slavery. Much like in antebellum Tennessee, the policies of the North towards abolition were still tenuous. It would be another year before Lincoln wrote the Emancipation Proclamation, which meant that the stated goal of the North at the time was still solely the preservation of the Union. Thus, each

commander had individual discretion over how to handle the slaves that they came across (Manning, 2014). Both Grant and General H. W. Halleck, the commander in the West, felt that the Black problem was of no concern to the military; accordingly, the initial reaction of the soldiers in their army was to simply turn away the droves of Black people looking to them for salvation. However, the number of refugees was so large that the army was soon inundated, leaving them unable to advance southward until they had resolved the runaway slave issue. With the permission of the Secretary of War, Grant facilitated the setup of the first contraband camp, around the Grand Junction region in Hardeman County, Tennessee. The purpose of this was twofold: primarily, Grant’s army decided to take advantage of the extra manpower at his disposal in the form of the Black refugees, conscripting the able-bodied ones into doing menial tasks for the army (Szcondronski, 2013; Lovett, 1976). Grant specifically ordered that the contrabands of war be organized into suitable companies for working: picking, ginning, bailing all cotton, jobs that bore eerie similarities to the jobs held by those slaves when they had been under Southern subjugation (Phillips, 1987; Lovett, 1980). The stated reason to have the camp at Grand Junction was to create a protected environment in which the military could provide a transition for the refugees to learn the expectations of full citizenship (Szcondronski, 2013). The camp’s founder, former Chaplain John Eaton of the 27th Ohio Infantry Regiment, began quartering the anywhere they could, usually abandoned shacks or farmhouses (Lovett, 1976). Eaton understood that to properly integrate former slaves into the Union, it was of crucial importance that contraband camps would provide safe and secure living conditions to runaway slaves and give them opportunities for education, employment, service in the war efforts, and social services such as marriage. However, due to chronic underfunding, there were difficulties even to provide the most basic necessities to Grand Junction (Szcondronski, 2013). Nevertheless, this first step towards the stability and education of Black people with the Union army was a crucial model to the creation of other contraband camps throughout Tennessee and the rest of the Union’s captured territory.

Grant’s march through Tennessee in Jan-

January and February 1862 was effective in pushing the Confederate army out of West Tennessee and opening the Cumberland River. (Murray & Hsieh, 2018). The Confederate army initially pushed back to Nashville. However, upon learning of the advance of General Grant from along the river and General Don Carlos Buell's army coming from the Northeast, the Confederate army command soon ordered the full evacuation of Nashville before the army arrived. As Grant's Union army finally took control of Nashville on February 23rd, 1862, those who were there to greet them were mostly Unionists and yet more Black refugees. The new Governor of Tennessee, Andrew Johnson, was worried that he would be kidnapped and hung as a traitor by disgruntled Confederate members that still had control over a significant part of the state; accordingly, he began demanding the Secretary of War and the Union Army increase fortifications around Nashville (Lovett, 1982). However, the Union had further campaigns in the West. Grant was dispatched to Shiloh and the lower Mississippi Valley, while Buell left to pursue a faction of the Confederate Army into Kentucky (Szcondronski, 2013). As a result, only a mere 6000 troops under General James S. Negley were left to hold the city. This, combined with reports that feared Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest might try to lead a counterattack on the Nashville army in the summer of 1862, led to an expedited completion of the military fortifications at Nashville (Lovett, 1982). Much of Fort Negley's fortifications were built by free Black people or refugee slaves, and the area surrounding the Fort quickly became home to one of the most densely populated contraband camps in the entire South. As word spread of Union control, there was a mass exodus of freedmen from west Tennessee into Nashville, only furthering the size of the refugee population congregated around Negley as it was constructed (Phillips, 1987).

III. Life in Fort Negley for Freed Slaves

Like with many other contraband camps, entire communities of freed Black refugees were made to work on the development of Fort Negley. Women and children as young as 14 and 15 would move supplies, cook food, wash clothes, and perform other

such labor to assist the laborers as they put up fortifications. Such refugees "were often forced to labor without adequate food, warm clothing, shelter, or pay," (Lovett, 1982, p.10), and once Confederate counterattacks on Nashville began, they had to "defend their creation with their lives." And this was often deadly to the laborers; between 600 and 800 people died during the construction of these fortifications. What the Union saw in this refugee camp, however, was opportunity. Absorbing the Black population to work for the Union army would free up more white troops to perform military duty. Many were put to work as cooks and farmers, working on the very same plantations that had previously been employed by the slavers of Nashville (Lovett, 1976). Alternatively, "slaves who did not volunteer their services to the Union cause were impressed into the labor battalions by the thousands to build forts, to dig entrenchments, to provide fuel for the trains, and to maintain important roads and railroads," (Lovett, 1976, p. 38). The Union soon grew so heavily reliant on cheap Black labor in Tennessee that they began to run out of freedmen to build their fortifications. After finding the local agricultural economy was suffering because of the scarcity of Black labor, Union officers proceeded to stop liberating slaves that they came across and left them to their masters. The maintenance of the Southern economy appeared more important to the Union army in Tennessee than the freedom of the slaves in that state, even after the strategy of total war began being employed in other parts of the South (Murray & Hsieh, 2018). The so-called "moral imperative" to free the slaves of the South so poignantly espoused in the Emancipation Proclamation was nowhere to be found in the hearts and minds of the soldiers themselves tasked with such liberation. Even after the Union eventually began allowing Black soldiers to be a part of the Union army following new legislation in late 1862, problems remained. Many Black, able-bodied men in Tennessee joined the army voluntarily due to a desire to defeat the South and earn their liberation. Yet, able-bodied refugees that sought employment with the army were serially given fewer rations than white soldiers and equivalent rations to what they had received as slaves. The army paid Black people 20% of what they promised them, and less than they paid white soldiers (Lovett, 1982; Szcondronski, 2013). Furthermore, the commanders

for the new Black regiments were exclusively white officers, many of whom were regarded as “misfits, glory-hunters, and incompetents,” (Lovett, 1976, p. 40). Although the Northerners may have imbued some semblance of humanity to the freed slaves, this population was primarily a means to an end, a deep wealth of labor to be exploited for wartime purposes, regardless of whether the freedmen themselves were willing to go along with the Union schemes. In essence, the North took advantage of the freedmen’s desires for freedom and exploited that fervor by mistreating these already susceptible workers. Black workers were providing labor and goodwill to the federal government in the hopes of becoming full-fledged citizens after the war was over. However, due to legal bureaucracy and racism and injustice on the part of the Northern government, a significant number of these workers and soldiers were unpaid, and in many cases, these workers were abused (Manning, 2014). This mistreatment of Black people in the army extended beyond the army hopefuls that came from the contraband camps. When the Union first began allowing Black troops, the recruitment orders ordered recruiters to traverse the Tennessee countryside looking for pockets of remaining slavers, stating that “the impressment of slaves without the owner’s consent was permissible,” (Lovett, 1976, pp. 40-41). The Union may have disseminated the idea of themselves being champions of Black “liberation” to drum up support for the war effort, but what the Union provided to these vulnerable populations was not true freedom. Instead, they were merely putting the slaves under new management to suit the desires of the army.

Individuals in contraband camps that were not conscripted into army related labor often fared just as poorly, if not worse, within the camps. It is undeniable that contraband camps did offer benefits for the slaves, such as allowing “some African Americans [to be] educated,” (Canday & Reback, 2010, p. 430). However, “conditions in contraband camps amounted to a humanitarian crisis of such proportions that it is hard to credit anything but misery occurring there,” (Manning, 2014, p. 190). This stemmed from the fact that there was a persistent lack of funds and resources, which made the freedmen unable to pull themselves out of poverty and in-education. Instead these policy choices served to en-

trench the discrimination and underfunding towards their communities that we continue to see today. Trained staff and medical equipment were difficult to come by even for Union soldiers, but the lack of support was especially pronounced in contraband camps. Disease and lack of sanitation led to an extremely high mortality rate among the refugees at Nashville. Beyond that, most clothes were only army outfits fit for men (Lovett, 1976; Szcondronski, 2013). This grew especially bad during the cold Nashville winters, where freezing temperatures would plague contraband camps and worsen their health. By some former slaves’ estimates, “at least 15 to 20 died every day in a single camp,” (Manning, 2014, p. 190). As a legal and political aberration, contraband camps provided miserable settings for reinventing citizenship or expanding political rights to freedmen.

As for education, which is widely regarded as the biggest success of the contraband camps, most of the Union’s efforts in Tennessee appear frustratingly ineffectual there as well. Despite having hundreds of students, most school hardly had any teachers or equipment to serve the student body. The best schools in Tennessee for freedmen were in metropolitan areas such as Memphis and Nashville. However, as those education systems continued to grow, freedmen in the rural areas of Tennessee continued traveling towards these hubs where schools had already been set up, which further strained the ability of these schools to be effectual (Phillips, 1987). And these failures of contraband camps were not purely circumstantial; they were the result of intentional decisions and policies implemented on the part of the Union. Ralph Hunt, superintendent of the contraband camps in Nashville, was accused of stealing supplies appropriated to these camps to sell as his own wares (Lovett, 1982). Worse still, Tennessee’s military governor Andrew Johnson (who later went on to become the 17th president of the US) deliberately provided the contraband camps under his jurisdiction with less resources than they asked for. Johnson frequently stated that he feared freedmen would become too dependent on the government for their basic needs, a sentiment eerily similar to modern accusations of Black populations being overly dependent on welfare and social programs (Szcondronski, 2013).

Throughout the war, the attitudes of the Union soldiers towards African Americans during

the war betrayed a continued sense of discrimination and white superiority from the Northern “liberators.” The Union soldiers themselves regarded this “contraband” with everything from condescension to outright hostility (O’Brien, 1981). Most Northern political officials had paternalistic, verging on outright repugnant, attitudes towards Black people. Andrew Johnson very famously rejected the notion of Black citizenship, deeming those political machinations too high-minded for the likes of former slaves (Manning, 2014). Members of the Tennessee Union Party who favored political rights for Black people were deemed as radicals -- and even they prudently declined to raise the issue during the 1864 presidential campaign (Cimprich, 1980). Chaplain John Eaton, founder of the first contraband camp and the superintendent of all contraband camps in Tennessee after the war, believed slavery “so oppressed [refugees] that they lived in a state of childhood,” (Szcondronski, 2013, p. 113). As a result, slaves would be doomed without the liberative efforts of white Northerners like himself, a starkly similar opinion to the one promulgated by plantation owners towards their slaves at the start of the Civil War. Many other Unionists advocated for and perpetuated sharecropping and other such labor structures that were economically stagnating to freedmen (Phillips, 1987). Clinton Fisk, a prominent voice in charge of freedmen rehabilitation, was one of these individuals; he believed that sharecropping would appease Southern whites, despite it being ineffectual in lifting African American families out of poverty (Lovett, 1980).

IV. Contraband Camps and the Freedmen’s Bureau during Reconstruction

These attitudes continued to shape the plight of former slaves in contraband camps after the war ended. The most direct form of action taken by the government towards this end was the establishment of the Freedmen’s Bureau during the Reconstruction period. The Freedmen’s Bureau was designed out of the same sentiment that led to contraband camps. Some Northern abolitionists wanted to provide an institution that provides for the transition of Black people from slaves to freedmen to citizens (Lovett, 1980). After some lobbying, the Freedmen’s Bureau was created formally give a pathway to integrate

newly-liberated slaves into society. Naturally, they were granted immediate jurisdiction over most contraband camps throughout the South, including at Negley. Clinton Fisk became the head of the Bureau, and his work in Nashville was immediately lauded by the rest of the Northern government as a shining example of rehabilitative efforts. His schooling program in Nashville led to the foundation of Fisk University in 1867, which was used as a blueprint for how other schools are set up later across the South. More recent studies of the Freedmen’s Bureau say that they were far more ineffectual and mismanaged than previously thought (Phillips, 1987). The most famous promise of the Freedmen’s Bureau, “40 acres and a mule” to all freed slaves, was unfulfilled. Instead, repatriation was given to the Southern landowners who had incurred a seizure of property by the state via the liberation of slaves (Candy & Reback, 2010). In many cases, the Freedmen’s Bureau reinforced systems of disenfranchisement that kept Black Americans as second tier. For example, immediately after the war, the Bureau forcibly relocated thousands of unemployed Black people in Memphis to the countryside because former slavers were facing a labor shortage for cotton pickers. As one slave put it, “they placed the freedman back into the hands of his vengeance-seeking former master,” (Lovett, 1976, p. 49).

There were a few silver linings to the efforts of the Bureau. Abolition remained permanent after the war in large part because citizenship was granted to freedmen. Frederick Douglass famously noted, “Once let the Black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S. . . . and . . . there is no power on earth . . . which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States,” (Manning, 2014, p. 174). Once intaking Black men into the army, there was a strong case to be made for their citizenship to follow. Citizenship was granted as the exchange of service to the Union for government protection of basic rights. However, this new bargain did not alleviate the suffering of former slaves, nor did it attempt to provide economic justice . There was also some progress in providing medical and educational services to former slaves and allowing greater social political recognition of Black people in the South (Lovett, 1980). Even this was mired with setbacks. White hostility towards Black people began to swell in the South to

wards the end of the war, and a large sect of white Americans, both Northern and Southern, thought racial equality to be “degrading” (Cimprich, 1980, p. 191). Things quickly spiraled downwards towards the end of Reconstruction. Contraband camp education programs began to teach political concepts to freedmen, which many felt threatened white political power and hegemony. This fear of losing supremacy spurred some of the most violent actions and reactions from white communities towards Black residents in the aftermath of the war. White resentment for the Bureau’s granting of opportunities towards former slaves reduced the effectiveness and longevity of the agency, and it wasn’t long before the Freedmen’s Bureau closed and new racially motivated restrictions were put in place, effectively undoing any progress made during Reconstruction (Lovett, 1980; Phillips, 1987).

V. Modern Implications of the Failure in Contraband Camps

The complicated legacy of contraband camps has reverberated far into the future, leading to many of the persistent problems we see in the South today. The influx of Black refugees to Nashville and to Fort Negley during the Civil War led to a doubling of the city’s Black population (Lovett, 1980; Lovett, 1982). Most contraband camps became permanent communities for freedmen after the war ended. This mass migration and subsequent integration of African Americans into the Tennessee army’s operations had lasting implications on the urban demographic layout, economy, labor demographics, and the development of Black life in the postwar South and to the present day (Foner, 1987, Lovett, 1976). In Nashville, the development of Fort Negley acted as a catalyst for the development of Black communities in the city and was responsible for the genesis of ghettoizing the Black population in Nashville due to segregating and concentrating them into contraband camps (Lovett, 1982). This pseudo-redlining practice has only worsened the economic divide between predominantly white communities and communities of color in the South. “Socioeconomic and fiscal disparities between metropolitan centers and their outlying settlement clusters have reached a critical level in the US, and current domestic demographic trends portend an

ever-worsening gulf in terms of economic resources” (Weaver, Miller & Deal, 2000, p. 851). This asymmetric development threatens the economic base of many US cities, including Nashville. No protections against racial price discrimination were instituted, which meant that Black people had to pay more to own land than whites in the postbellum South. This led to fewer opportunities to leave contraband camp areas and build their own wealth (Candy & Reback, 2010). In addition, urban sprawl visibly threatens the sustainability of the physical environment of large urban communities (Weaver, Miller & Deal, 2000). The social implications of contraband camps are also significant. Fort Negley became a meeting spot for the KKK after the war (Lovett, 1982), highlighting the racial backlash that fomented within these Black ghetto regions. Even now, the tensions and disparities between Black America and White America remains particularly salient on the grounds where contraband camps once stood.

VI. Conclusion

What was it that those slaves saw when they deserted their masters for Grant and the Union army? Was it freedom? Salvation? Or was it just another form of hell? A look into the life and development of contraband camps makes it abundantly clear that, either through misguided intention or outright disdain, the Union soldiers, when given the opportunity to permanently overcome the wounds of slavery in the United States, instead became a new oppressor to the people they were tasked with liberating. Perfunctory attempts during the war and Reconstruction to inculcate Black people into Tennessee’s economic and political fold were largely failures, and the aftereffects of these decisions still have lasting ramifications on the world and on Black America today. Through this, it is clear that racial stratification remains an ever-present issue with the United States. The responsibility to admit to and overcome these shortcomings rests as much with the present generation as it did with those of the 1860s.

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