

**FORTS HENRY, HEIMAN, AND
DONELSON:
THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE**

A Thesis

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By

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FORTS HENRY, HEIMAN, AND DONELSON:

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Little has been written about the particular experiences for slaves who were living in Western Kentucky and Middle Tennessee on the eve of the Civil War. When Ulysses S. Grant achieved victory in February 1862, slaves sought refuge, freedom, and new opportunities at Forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson. Slaves kept coming to the Union-occupied forts throughout the war and supported the war effort by building fortifications and guarding railroads, and eventually, African-American men enlisted as soldiers. African-American families built homes, and established schools and churches near the Union camps. Education was a priority. By the war's end, a large African-American community had developed near Fort Donelson, called the Free State, and it survived until the late 1800s. The transition from slavery was not easy. Violence toward former slaves continued in the postwar period in Western Kentucky and Middle Tennessee. But, those African-Americans who stayed in the areas surrounding the old forts created new lives and tried to adjust to living in an atmosphere devoid of slavery.

FORTS HENRY, HEIMAN, AND DONELSON:
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INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1862, Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant achieved what President Abraham Lincoln and Americans whose loyalty remained with the Union had been waiting for—victory. While Northerners rejoiced, shocked and angry Confederates tried to understand why the river forts on the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers had been abandoned. Though newspapers proclaimed the river forts as a strategic military victory, no mention was made of the other victors at these battles. For while the nation focused on the details of the battles and what Grant’s next move might be, thousands of enslaved Africans were quietly abandoning slave owners and seeking refuge and freedom at the Union Army’s camps.¹

While there has been a wealth of information about African-Americans’ involvement in the Civil War, from their contributions to the Confederate and Union armies to their bravery in battle, written since the mid-1960s, little has been written about their early war experiences, especially those at Forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson, sites of the first important Union victory.² This thesis will specifically address the pre-war

¹ Stanley F. Horn, *The Army of the Tennessee* (Norman, OK: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 104.

² John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 7th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980); John David Smith, ed., *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); James M. McPherson, *The Negroes Civil War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991); and Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953; reprint, New York: DaCapo Press, 1989).

history of enslaved Africans living in Stewart County, Tennessee and Calloway County, Kentucky (the forts are located in these counties) and how slaves sought freedom and protection at the Union river forts. Further, I will address how slaves initially contributed and supported the Union garrison from 1862 to 1865, and later enlisted as United States Colored Troops. Finally, I will consider the transition from slave to freedman or woman in the postwar period to 1885. What was the significance of this particular campaign to the future of thousands of enslaved Africans in Kentucky and Tennessee? What were the immediate changes that resulted from the Union victory? Were changes long-lasting? Did former slaves continue to live and work near the old Union forts? These are important questions that have not had a great deal of sustained attention from historians.

Historians have not completely ignored the African-American experience at these river forts. In fact, John Cimprich in his 1985 book, *Slavery's End in Tennessee*, devotes much discussion to fugitive slaves, their relationship with the military, and the tremendous social and political changes that resulted from Union occupation of Tennessee. Betty Joe Wallace's *Land Between the Rivers* reinforces Cimprich's evidence by describing the role of African American men as soldiers. Benjamin F. Cooling's most recent book, *Fort Donelson's Legacy: War and Society in Kentucky and Tennessee*, acknowledges that Union victory at Forts Henry and Donelson brought "de facto army emancipation." Brooks Simpson in *Let Us Have Peace: Ulysses S. Grant and the Politics of War and Reconstruction, 1861-1868* evaluates Grant's leadership by analyzing his decisions concerning fugitive slaves. Still much remains to be done to fully understand

the ways in which Union victory and continuing occupation affected African-Americans in this area.³

³ John Cimprich, *Slavery's End in Tennessee* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1985); Betty Joe Wallace, *Between the Rivers: History of the Land Between the Lakes* (Clarksville, TN: Austin Peay State University, 1992); Benjamin F. Cooling, *Fort Donelson's Legacy: War and Society in Kentucky and Tennessee, 1862-1863* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997), xiv; and Brooks Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace: U.S. Grant and the Politics of War and Reconstruction, 1861-1868* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

SLAVERY IN ANTEBELLUM STEWART COUNTY (TN) AND
CALLOWAY COUNTY (KY)

What is known about slavery in Western Kentucky and Middle Tennessee? The geography of both regions affected their economies and distribution of slaves. Agriculture dominated each region's economy, but each region's economy was supplemented with commerce (steamboat trade) and some industrial pursuits (silk farming, iron industry, textile mills). The mountainous eastern portions of each state were not favorable for slavery, while the central and western portions of each state, which were better suited for row crop farming, depended upon slave labor. In his study, *Land Between the Rivers*, Milton Henry examined court documents, will books, and census records for Trigg and Calloway Counties in Kentucky and Stewart and Montgomery Counties in Tennessee. He found that subsistence farming was generally characteristic of the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers region prior to the Civil War. Large-scale plantation farming was almost non-existent except for a few areas in the river bottoms and the iron "plantations" that flourished in Trigg and Lyon Counties in Kentucky and Stewart and Montgomery Counties in Tennessee. Slavery, at least in Tennessee, was affected by the type of farm operation that the slave owner pursued: subsistence farming, cash crop farming, livestock farming, or plantations producing cotton or hemp. Each had very different labor needs. Anita S. Goodstein believed that most Tennessee agricultural producers were a mixture of all of these. Donald L. Winters in *Tennessee Farming, Tennessee Farmers: Antebellum Agriculture of the Upper South* believed that slave labor provided the only labor supply "large enough and stable enough to meet the needs of

large-scale tobacco and cotton farmers” in Tennessee. His interpretation of agricultural censuses for Tennessee between 1840 and 1860 show that farmers, either small family ones or larger operations met their labor needs three ways: they employed some white laborers, owned their own slaves, or rented slaves by the day, week, or month. There was a growing involvement in commercial agriculture, showing sharp increases in cotton, tobacco, wheat, and swine production.⁴

Most farmers were as self-sufficient as they could be, and they owned few, if any slaves. In Stewart County, it is estimated that one family in seven owned slaves, usually fewer than ten. In 1860, there were 2,415 slaves in the county, or 24 percent of the total population. The largest slaveholders were the iron furnace company Woods, Lewis, and Company (418), and iron furnace masters George Stacker (112) and Thomas Kirkman (116). In Calloway County, the census showed that there were 1,492 slaves living in the county (15 percent of the total population). The largest slaveholder owned 24 slaves. There were no iron furnace operations in Calloway County. In comparison, adjacent Trigg County (KY) had vast iron ore supplies and there were 3,449 slaves (32 percent of the population). Daniel Hillman, another iron furnace owner, held 255 slaves. Tennessee’s slave population reached its peak in 1860—24.8 percent of the population was slave. Anita Goodstein’s research showed that over three-fourths of Tennessee’s slave owners held fewer than 10 slaves. The slave population in Kentucky varied somewhat from Tennessee. The total population peaked at 24.7 percent in 1830 and

⁴John B. Boles, *Black Southerners, 1619-1869* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1984), 75-77; Robert E. Corlew, *Tennessee: A Short History* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 228; Milton Henry, *Land Between the Rivers* (Clarksville, TN: Austin Peay State University, n.d.), 27, 28, and 31; Anita S. Goodstein, “Slavery,” *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History*, <http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net>; and Donald L. Winters, *Tennessee Farming, Tennessee Farmers: Antebellum Agriculture in the Upper South* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994), xi-xii, 48-75, 138, 144, and 154.

declined to 20.4 percent by 1860. Thus, it appears that the majority of slaves that were in counties that had furnace operations were held either individually by the furnace owner's family or collectively by the furnace companies. "[B]oth states reflected fairly typical upper south and border state population distributions for states in which large plantation agriculture was not a dominant economic activity."⁵

In neither either state was the free Black population ever large; it never rose above one percent of the total population.⁶

What were conditions like for slaves living in Western Kentucky and Middle Tennessee? How were slaves treated? How heavy was their workload? Historians now concur that simply because smaller numbers of slaves lived and worked in Kentucky and Tennessee it does not follow that slavery was benign. The cities of Nashville and Memphis in Tennessee and Louisville, Kentucky were well-known in the Deep South as major slave trading centers. In 1850, eight slave auctioneers operated in Nashville. Some of the "human cargo" was purchased in Kentucky and sold to owners in Alabama and Mississippi. Restrictive slave codes prevented slaves in most Southern states from leaving the place where they worked, from selling goods, or possessing firearms without their owner's permission. Slaves could be physically punished, generally without restrictions. Slaves who were caught meeting in private for religious services were punished. At the Wessyngton Plantation in Middle Tennessee, slaves caught meeting to

⁵ Winters, 30-47, Stephen V. Ash, *Tennessee's Iron Industry Revisited: The Stewart County Story* (Golden Pond, KY, n.d.), 30; United States Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Stewart County, Tennessee, Calloway and Trigg Counties, Kentucky; Paul Bergeron, *Paths of the Past: Tennessee, 1770-1970* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1979), 42; Goodstein, <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net>; and J. Blaine Hudson, *Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2002), 15, 26.

⁶ Bergeron, 44-45; <http://www.ket.org/underground/history/questionof.htm>; and Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891*, vol. 1 (Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 1992), 108.

pray for freedom were to be “held by two other slaves and whipped with a large wooden paddle with holes in it and salt and straw rubbed in the wounds.” Tennessee and Kentucky did not prohibit slaves from obtaining an education, as many slave states did. Slaves in Nashville, Memphis, and Columbia, Tennessee, however, were forbidden to do so by city ordinances.⁷

What smaller slaveholding does suggest is that slaves lived and worked closely with their owners. In the Upper South, the master-slave relationship was usually more personal than on the larger plantations. Cimprich’s study of Tennessee slavery found that the “high degree of personal contact between master and slave . . . may have conditioned slaves to accept their fates.” However, “their Christianity, their experience of abuse, and their observation of freedom’s benefits worked against the system . . . The institution’s failure to make all slaves accept proslavery values incorporated a measure of instability into it.” Slave owners provided food and clothing provisions for their slaves. Established standards for providing food and basic necessities were rare; treatment and care for slaves depended upon the inclination of individual slave owners. But, slavery was not a “uniform experience.” A slave’s life depended upon whether he or she lived in a rural, agrarian or urban environment and what the slave owner’s needs might be. A young Union private’s account of what he saw happening in the Tennessee countryside in early 1862 after the Union capture of Fort Donelson gives us a glimpse of how slave and owner worked together: “The wives and daughters of the poorer farmers do all the garden work, and much besides that ours hand over to the men. We see black women grubbing out

⁷ Lucas, 43-50; Bobby L. Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 18; Cimprich, 7-11; Charles E. Orser, Jr. and David W. Babson, *Families and Cabins: Archaeological and Historical Investigations at Wessyngton Plantation, Robertson County, Tennessee* (Normal, IL: Illinois State University, 1994), 39; and Ivan E. McDougale, *Slavery in Kentucky, 1792-1865* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1970), 73.

bushes in the field, and white ones plowing, harrowing, and hauling grain, with ox teams to the mill.” It was much the same at the Killebrew farm near Clarksville, Tennessee. Young slave women would work the fields, but when the harvest was over, they sewed, knitted, or spun thread. Older women would spin and care for the children of those who worked in the fields. All slaves were clothed from cloth produced at the farm, and a skilled slave made shoes for other slaves and the Killebrew family.⁸

The lifestyle for slaves at the iron furnace plantations likely differed from slaves in other work environments because of the very different nature of their work. Iron furnace operations required much labor—contemporary accounts describe operations that included thousands of men, mostly slaves, but some white workers. They lived in “dormitory-style” housing or individual cabins. Slaves would also be provided with medical care and allowed to purchase goods and merchandise from the company store. Evidence suggests that slaves owned by the furnace companies worked on the task or overwork system. Slaves could receive cash by working extra hours or weekends beyond their normal work schedule. Slaves also may have raised “truck-patch” gardens, growing any crops they wished.⁹

In comparison, the only large-scale farming operation in the region in terms of manpower and productivity was Wessyngton Plantation, a tobacco plantation approximately 55 miles northeast of Dover, Tennessee. On the eve of the Civil War, plantation owner George A. Washington owned more than 13,000 acres, 274 slaves, and

⁸Cimprich, 11, Goodstein, <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net>; Charles Nott, *Sketches of the War: A Series of Letters to the North Moore Street School of New York* (New York: Charles T. Evans, 1863), 98; and Mary C. Killebrew, “Recollections of a Lifetime, 1902,” 36-37, Clarksville-Montgomery County Library, Clarksville, TN.

⁹Ash, 30; George E. Jackson, *Cumberland Furnace: A Frontier Industrial Village* (Virginia Beach, Virginia: The Donning Company, 1994), 28-29; and Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Press, 1974), 524-550, 562-584.

raised 250,000 pounds of dark-fired tobacco. Slaves worked from sunrise to sunset, Monday through Friday, and a half day on Saturday. They could earn their own money by working holidays like Christmas and New Years or by contracting themselves out to work elsewhere. Slaves at this plantation lived in single cabins that housed a family or eight to twelve people. Children too young to work stayed with older slave women at the plantation nursery. Some historians argue that slaves in most states were allowed to hire themselves out in order to save their money to buy their freedom.¹⁰

Slaves in Kentucky and Tennessee were treated no differently than slaves in other areas of the slaveholding South. Owners used various methods to control disobedient or runaway slaves: corporal punishment or threatening to sell them further south. Not only did being “sold South” mean separation from family, but it also meant hard labor in cotton or rice fields and potentially cruel overseers. Tennessee farmer Robert H. Cartmell dealt with runaways first by whipping, then by hiring an overseer, and finally deciding to whip one repeated runaway Dave “severely or sell him to the Southern country.” Clarksville farmer Joseph Buckner Killebrew, writing in the postwar period, always regarded his slaves as “inferior beings who needed my care and . . . it was necessary for me to be firm in my management of them.” Killebrew thought that there were “inhumane slave drivers” but that they were rare. Slaves had some protection because their owners could not risk damaging their financial investments.¹¹

Resistance to slavery came in many forms—work slowdowns, damaging tools or equipment, and flight to free areas. Traveling through any slave state was dangerous,

¹⁰ Orser and Babson, 14-22, 36-37; Goodstein, <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net>; and Genovese, 524-535.

¹¹ J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *Lexington's Slave Dealers and Their Southern Trade* (Louisville: Filson Club Quarterly, 1938), 11; Lucas, 63-64; Chase C. Mooney, *Slavery in Tennessee* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1971), 179-180; and J.B. Killebrew, “Recollections of My Life: An Autobiography, 1896,” 160, Clarksville-Montgomery County Public Library, Clarksville, TN.

especially if the freedom-seeking slave did not have assistance. Slave “catchers” did track runaways through Tennessee and Kentucky, even crossing the Ohio River. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 appeased some slave owners across the South, but made successful slave escapes even more difficult. How many slaves escaped during the antebellum period is unknown; estimates vary from up to 2,000 per year in the late antebellum period to a total of 100,000 prior to the Civil War. In Kentucky, the actual number of reported slave escapes was small. In 1850, only 96 runaways were reported and the number only slightly increased to 119 by 1860. The choice to escape the bonds of slavery meant risking one’s own life or those of family members left behind. It also meant that freedom-seekers might never again see family members who continued to be held in slavery. The obstacles faced by runaways were tremendous, from fear of being caught and punished, to illness, hunger, betrayal, and the unknown geography of the escape route. Researchers have identified escape routes through Kentucky and Tennessee which closely followed the natural travel routes—the Mississippi, Cumberland, and Tennessee Valleys—or man-made routes such as the Natchez Trace. The close proximity of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers to the Ohio River must have been a strong inducement for escape. Slave escapes over shorter distances through Tennessee and Kentucky were more successful than attempts by slaves from plantations in Mississippi or Alabama. Middle Tennessee slave owners knew the possible overland escape routes. Numerous advertisements listed Kentucky and Ohio as possible destination points for runaways. Lovett’s research showed that several slaves from Nashville escaped, via Kentucky, to Cincinnati, Ohio.¹²

¹² Genovese, 648-658; *Underground Railroad* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998), 52-54; and Lovett, 23.

In the past, historians have tended to downplay the stories of the “underground railroad”—“conductors” who led freedom-seeking slaves via safe house “stations” to free territories in the Northeast and Pacific Northwest United States, Canada, Mexico, and even to the Caribbean. Studies by Stanley Elkins and Kenneth Stampp in the late 1960s finally changed the way that many historians looked at the institution of slavery. Since that time, almost every facet of slavery and emancipation has been analyzed—from how slaves worshipped and cared for their children to how they ate and what they wore. Some of the most extensive works include Ira Berlin and others’ *Remembering Slavery: African-Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery & Freedom* to Eugene and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s studies of slave culture. Historians also began to review and analyze first-person accounts recorded by slaves. George Rawick, Charles L. Blockson, and John Blassingame have edited or used these accounts in their works on slavery. Larry Gara’s work on the legends of the Underground Railroad highlights both the myths and the realities. One of the most recent studies about slave escapes in Kentucky is written by J. Blaine Hudson.¹³

Freedom-seekers who were successful likely had several things in common: they had knowledge of an escape route, had assistance from others along the way, and once they reached free areas, continued to evade slave catchers. Many historians contend that

¹³ *Underground Railroad*, 82-83; Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, *Remembering Slavery: African-Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery & Freedom* (W.W. Norton & Co., 1998); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Press, 1974); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black & White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of a Black Community* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972); Charles L. Blockson, *The Underground Railroad: First-Person Narratives of Escapes to Freedom in the North* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1987); John Blassingame, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana Universities Press, 1977); Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996); and J. Blaine Hudson, *Fugitive Slaves & the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002).

most slaves who ran away “initiated the entire process of escape” with little assistance from others. One courageous enslaved African named David who lived in nearby Clarksville (Montgomery County), Tennessee escaped to Canada. He managed to evade being caught by frequently changing his name, a practice he continued even after he returned to Clarksville during the Civil War.¹⁴

Abolition societies were non-existent in Western Kentucky and Middle Tennessee, though there were “anti-slavery forces . . . as long as slavery existed.” Reverend John Gregg Fee in Kentucky and Elijah Embree, Reverend John Rankin, and Peter Cartwright in Tennessee led strong protests against slavery within their states. In Memphis, abolitionist Jacob Burkle aided freedom-seeking slaves by hiding them in his home. Frances Wright conducted her experiment at Nashoba, a plan that called for the gradual abolition of slavery. Some Nashvillians supported antislavery movements, but outright support of abolition would have been “suicidal.”¹⁵

Economic reasons, the concern for white supremacy, and the “fear of bodily harm” kept outspoken abolitionists from really threatening the demise of slavery in Tennessee. Pre-war sentiments may have been best expressed by comments in a pro-secession meeting in Clarksville. To these men, slavery possessed “vital importance to the social and pecuniary interests of the Southern states, establishing as it does, the true *status* of the races, recognizing the social and political equality of the whites only, and allowing the degradation and vassalage only of the slave or inferior race.” Similar

¹⁴Lucas, 61-74; Hudson, 98, 101-102; and “Tracks to Freedom,” *The Leaf-Chronicle* (Clarksville), 2 February 2003.

¹⁵Caleb P. Patterson, *The Negroe in Tennessee, 1790-1865* (New York: Negro University Press, 1968), 181, 195; Lester C. Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee, 1790s to 1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 24; Peggy Robbins, “Experiment at Nashoba Plantation,” *American History Illustrated* 15 (April 1980): 13-15; and Lovett, 18.

sympathies were expressed by States Rights leaders in Kentucky who supported secession. These leaders reminded Kentuckians that loyalty to the United States had closed rivers, embargoed railroads, prevented their goods from getting to markets, and taxed citizens to carry on an “unnatural war, one object of which is openly avowed to be to set at liberty your slaves, and . . . to put arms in their hands and give them political and social equality” Slavery was not essential to the state economy but this did not “lessen the tenacity with which many white Kentuckians defended it.” By the time of the presidential election in 1860, many non-slaveholding whites were sympathetic to the Southern Democratic Party platform because they feared the rise of free labor, the policies of the Republican Party, and the abolition of slavery.¹⁶

This “fear of the loss of racial status” remained from the throughout the antebellum and Civil War period. Private Eugene Marshall, 5th Iowa Cavalry, wrote harshly about the people he encountered while stationed at forts Henry and Heiman in 1862. Marshall had not been in the area very long when he experienced the some “homegrown” hostility. Some locals ardently supported “southern rights” and a few communities were “notoriously secesh,” particularly Murray, Kentucky where “nearly all the citizens there are secessionists. . . .” Just one month after his arrival at Fort Heiman, Marshall wrote that the “people here are mostly laboring men and while they seem to fear negro equality admit that they had much rather there were no slaves here but say that they believe the negroes as a class have not capacity for taking care of themselves if turned loose upon their own resources.” Similar feelings existed in 1864. Private Mitchel

¹⁶ Lamon, 24, Cimprich, 10, E. Merton Coulter, *Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966 reprint), 134, Boles, 77-79, Hudson, 19, and Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, and Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 9-10, 309.

Thompson, stationed at Fort Donelson with the 83rd Illinois Infantry, wrote to his wife that “Kentucky folks [were] kicking up quite a fuss by us recruiting the U.S. Service with their darkies and teaching them to read. They have been trying to get us sent away and have Kentucky troops in our place” The attitudes of the populace toward slavery in Kentucky and Tennessee seemed akin to the rest of the slaveholding South.¹⁷

Fear of slave rebellions preoccupied the minds of slave owners and caused widespread panic—at least it did in the areas of Western Kentucky and Middle Tennessee where slaves were heavily concentrated. For instance, in the neighboring counties of Trigg and Christian (KY) and Montgomery County (TN), the number of slaves exceeded 3,000 persons in each county. The entire slave population of Christian and Trigg Counties combined numbered over 13,000 by 1860. Hopkinsville, in Christian County, was one of the largest towns in Western Kentucky, and enslaved persons comprised 43 percent of the population. It is not surprising, then, that the Western Kentucky and Middle Tennessee regions experienced increasingly restrictive slave codes and violence against slaves. Marion Lucas referred to Kentucky’s slave rebellions as “scares.” No evidence suggested that massacres or violence against slave owners ever occurred.¹⁸

The greatest fear concerning a slave rebellion occurred in December 1856. Accounts of this incident varied depending upon the county one lived in or which newspaper reported the story. In Hopkinsville, a rumored slave uprising prompted local authorities to jail and whip 50 slave suspects in order to obtain confessions about a Christmas Day “conspiracy.” Several citizens of Hopkinsville rushed to the small town

¹⁷ James O. Horton, *Slavery and the Coming of the Civil War: A Matter for Interpretation*, unpublished paper, 6-7; Mary Bess Henderson, Evelyn Janet Young, and Anna Irene Nahelhoffer, *Dear Eliza: The Letters of Mitchel Andrew Thompson* (Ames, Iowa: Carter Press, 1978), 75; and Eugene Marshall Papers, Special Collections, Duke University, Durham, NC.

¹⁸ Lucas, xix, xxi, 59-60.

of Lafayette, Kentucky (15 miles from Dover, Tennessee) to help defend the community. It was believed that slaves “intended to fight their way across Kentucky,” crossing the Ohio River to the safety of Indiana. Another account said that a keg of gunpowder found in Clarksville would be used by slaves, who would march on the city, plunder the banks, and flee to the North.¹⁹

By far the worst violence occurred in Dover, Tennessee, also in December 1856, where the rumors of rebellion prompted an interrogation of slaves at some of the iron furnaces, foundries, and rolling mills, where an estimated 3,000 to 10,000 slaves worked. Two newspaper accounts described the “supposed” plan of Stewart County slaves to take up arms against owners in the isolated furnaces communities, seize white women, attack Dover, and escape to free states in the North. The *Goodspeed Histories* (published in 1886) recorded that slaves “would hold meetings on Sundays and of nights” in secret places and that the meetings “were instigated by several white men who claimed to be preachers.” Slaves supposedly were to arm themselves, overpower owners, and make their way north through Hopkinsville. Still another account described how a slave who worked at the Cumberland Iron Works near Dover ran away to avoid “taking part in a slave insurrection conspiracy.” As a result of this “confession,” over 80 slaves and 3 men with the Free Soil party in Dover were arrested. Various sources reported that from nineteen to thirty slaves were hung, some beheaded and the heads stuck upon poles in the town square. The *Goodspeed Histories* stated that “a citizen of Dover [who was still living at the time of publication] cut the heads of dead slaves . . . hoist[ed] them on poles

¹⁹ Charles B. Dew, “Black Ironworkers and the Slave Insurrection Panic of 1856,” *Journal of Southern History* 46 (August 1975): 329-333; Lucas, 59-60; and Iris Hopkins McClain, *A History of Stewart County, Tennessee* (Columbia, TN, privately printed, 1965), 36.

[and] paraded the streets” to terrify the slave population. Whites were so nervous that vigilante committees appointed patrols for the neighborhoods.²⁰

This story is verified by two accounts. Mrs. George Lewis, wife of iron furnace owner George Lewis of Woods, Lewis, and Company, one of the owners of the Cumberland Iron Works, experienced the actual “event.” In an 1856 letter to her parents, she wrote of the examinations and confessions obtained from house and company slaves:

They will be hung at Dover in a few days. Hal Bradford, Miles the Preacher, and Charley Lewis, the only Negro who could read or write and he was the sole leader here. They were under the impression that the Fremont men from the North would come to their assistance and if they did not succeed entirely here, they were to fly as ___ possible to the Northern states and Fremont would protect them, but the Democrats here were to share the same fate as us Whigs . . . The Dover committee have four white men who live near Randolph [Randolph Forge] which all the negroes all told were to join them. If they only had proof from the whites they would hang them. The company will lose 5 negroes and their best hands and there is proof enough if the law needs to take it up to 30²¹

Citizens still talked about the violence in 1862. Private Marshall recorded the accounts of violence against slaves in the supposed rebellion:

[T]here was a great excitement in relation to slave insurrection and they tell me that at the various iron works in the county many negroes were whiped [sic] to death to make them confess the conspiracy that the heads of several were cut off and stuck on a pole as a terror to the rest and that at Hilman’s [Daniel Hillman] furnace below here one negro jumped into the furnace while it was in full operation and was completely consumed. All the horrors they relate as coolly [sic] as any other matter which has occurred

²⁰ Henry, 30; *The Goodspeed Histories* (Columbia, Tennessee: Woodward and Stinson Printing Company, 1972), 900-901; and McClain, 36.

²¹ Your affectionate daughter (Mrs. George T. Lewis), Cumberland Iron Works, to My dear parents, ALS [photocopy], n.d. (December 1856), Peggy Dillard Collection (private), Bellevue, Tennessee.

without seeming to feel that there is anything very terrible about it.²²

Thus, it is clear from the accounts recorded about the lives of slaves living in the regions in question, that their condition and quality of life depended upon where they lived and whether their owner was a benevolent or harsh taskmaster. Slavery in Calloway and Stewart Counties was neither benign nor gentle. To be separated from one's family or to be "sold south" was a severe form of punishment for Upper South slaves. Racism, violence against slaves, antipathy for abolitionist agitators, and fears of slave uprisings were prevalent among whites living in the region.

²² Marshall Papers.

SLAVERY AND THE UNION ARMY AT THE RIVER FORTS

What did the arrival of Union forces in the area in 1861 suggest for enslaved Africans? Historian John Cimprich accurately describes the role of the Union Army: “[F]ederal occupation . . . created new opportunities for slaves to make choices.” Indeed, the Union victories at forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson gave slaves in the area their best chance to seek freedom. Union victory at these river forts meant freedom was possible for these and other slaves living in the entire region. Before the war, freedom had meant traveling great distances to reach northern or western states, the Caribbean, or Canada. Slaves, who may have stayed with their masters out of fear of punishment, saw a federal camp as a reason to escape.²³

Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant himself aided the runaway slave’s cause. After the surrender of Fort Donelson in February 1862, Grant issued an order that explained how slaves would be “employed for the Quarter Masters Department for the benefit of the Government” rather than returning them to the enemy. This same procedure was followed at Fort Henry when Grant’s superior, Major General Henry Halleck, ordered Grant to “impress . . . all slaves of secessionists in [the] vicinity to work on the fortification.” Union soldiers also began hiring runaway slaves as personal servants or cooks. “I am bound to have half a dozen [runaway slaves] if the war lasts much longer,” wrote one Union soldier to his wife in 1862.²⁴

These runaways were protected from slavery as long as they remained behind Union lines, but legally, they were still enslaved by the laws of Kentucky and Tennessee,

²³Cimprich, 21-25.

²⁴ John Y. Simon, *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, vol. 4 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 193-194 and 290-291; Benjamin F. Cooling, *Forts Henry and Donelson: Key to the Confederate Heartland* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1978), 248; and Michael T. Meier, “Lorenzo Thomas and the Recruitment of Blacks,” in *Black Soldiers in Blue*, 251.

because slavery was not abolished in these states until 1865. President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation did not affect slavery in Kentucky or Union-occupied areas in Tennessee. The First Confiscation Act, passed by Congress in August 1861, declared that any property used with the owner's consent to aid the insurrection against the United States could be seized and captured, including slaves, who would be forever free. How this act was interpreted by military commanders in the field was "tightly defined" by President Lincoln, however. For instance, Lincoln sanctioned General Benjamin F. Butler's decision in May 1861 to hold runaway slaves as "contraband[s] of war." But, Lincoln ordered Major General John C. Fremont to rescind his emancipation policy for slaves in Missouri in August 1861. The only other policy guiding Grant's actions toward the treatment of runaway slaves at the river forts was General Halleck's General Order No. 3 of November 1861. This order prevented fugitive slaves from entering Union lines, unless permission was granted by the commanding general. Runaway slaves continued to come inside forts Henry and Donelson after they were captured in February 1862 (Fort Heiman was abandoned by Confederates before Grant's army attacked). Grant had little policy to serve as a basis for his decision on what to do with them.²⁵

At the time of the surrender of Fort Donelson, Grant seemed to think of former slaves as welcomed labor. For instance, during conversations with Confederate Brigadier General Simon B. Buckner, he suggested that the "[army] needed laborers, let the

²⁵ For a discussion of the First Confiscation Act and the policy of emancipation, see Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), chapter 6; Franklin, 206-207 and 221-224; Simon, 290-291; *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, series I, vol. III (Washington, D.C., 1883), 370, hereafter cited *O.R.*; and Simpson, 20f.

Negroes work for us.” He did allow Confederate officers to “take along their slaves,” to prison camp and told Buckner that they would not be liberated.²⁶

The question of runaway slaves did not go away. Within two weeks of the surrender, Grant faced requests from slave owners for permission to search Union camps for their “property.” In response, Grant issued General Order No. 14 on February 16, 1862. In this order, Grant reminded soldiers that they must not allow runaway slaves to enter the camp and instructed that anyone keeping slaves should “immediately report them to the District Quartermaster.” Grant also reaffirmed, however, that captured slaves would not be “released or permitted to return to their masters.” Estimates of the actual number of slaves who were present after the capture of the forts varies. The Indianapolis *Daily Journal* reported that 500 slaves had been “imported” to work on Fort Henry.²⁷

While Grant “groped for an answer to the fugitive slave question,” national leaders and opinion makers focused on his every action. Other Union commanders had been reprimanded for making the wrong decisions concerning slaves. Grant’s situation at Fort Donelson was precarious. On at least one occasion, overzealous Union cavalry at Donelson confiscated slaves that later had to be returned. Northern newspapers criticized Grant for returning “old men, women, and children to their masters.” Although Grant answered these charges to Congressional members, it was an embarrassing incident for him—one he was unlikely to forget. In future directives, he cautioned Union soldiers to turn over slaves to the Quartermaster’s Department.²⁸

²⁶ Simon, 193*n*, 291*n*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 290-291*n*, and Indianapolis *Daily Journal*, 12 February, 1862.

²⁸ Simpson, 21-22; Simon, 190*n*, 267-269*n*, 270-271, 363*n*, and 408; and *O.R.*, series I, vol. X, 40. For a discussion of other Union commanders, see Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1987), chapters 1 and 2.

Runaway slaves continued to make their way to the forts and, despite orders, Union soldiers continued to allow them to work and live in the camps. However, not every commander was as tolerant toward the refugees as Grant had been. In June 1862, a frustrated Colonel W.W. Lowe, who commanded the forts after Grant's departure, sent a telegram to headquarters, asking for instructions on returning slaves to a loyal owner. Lowe eventually made the decision to return the young boy and ordered that he be "put beyond [the] lines" at Fort Heiman, with assurance that no one "interfere[d] in the matter." In several telegrams, Lowe cautioned commanders at the forts to prevent slaves from coming within the lines. Finally, Lowe requested, in November 1862, that Colonel Abner C. Harding stop sending runaway slaves from Donelson to forts Henry and Heiman. Lowe's explanation was that he had "no means of taking care of them, and nothing to feed them on."²⁹

Each person who commanded the garrison at the river forts interpreted military directives concerning runaway slaves differently. By July 1862 colonels Lowe and Harding received a bit more direction with the passage of the Second Confiscation Act of 1862, a measure passed by the Republican Congress that permitted the confiscation and liberation of slaves belonging to secessionists behind Union lines. This legislative act, along with the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation issued in September 1862, may have prompted Union officers to take a more aggressive stance toward slavery. For instance, Colonel Abner C. Harding, who succeeded Colonel Lowe as commander of the river forts in 1863, refused to return runaway slaves to their master because he did not

²⁹ W.W. Lowe to M. Patrick, 21 June 1862, 24 RG 393, vol. 172/214 DMT, National Archives, Building I, Washington, D.C., hereafter cited NAB; W.W. Lowe to A.A. G. Department of Mississippi, 21 June 1862, 116, RG 393, vol. 172/214, pt. IV, NAB; and W.W. Lowe to A.C. Harding, 10 November 1862, 192, RG 393 vol. 172/214 DMT, NAB.

“understand that [he had] any right to do so directly or indirectly.” Harding’s replacement, Colonel William P. Lyon, seemed somewhat confused by the Second Confiscation Act. He wrote headquarters in June 1863 asking for guidance concerning orders to make lists of all slaves employed by the government. Lyon stated that “large numbers of women and children” had come inside the Union lines, but were not employed by the government. He tried to protect them from being taken by slave owners, but he needed instructions on what to do with the women and children. Lyon felt that if these families continued to come within the Union lines, that the government should offer subsistence. Lyon apparently never received a reply to his question. The only solution he was offered was from General William S. Rosencran’s telegraph dated 17 June 1863 which instructed Lyon to “exclude all [fugitives] except where humanity manifestly demand[ed] it.”³⁰

The plight of former slaves and the confusion of military commanders was picked up by the Troy (OH) *Times* in 1862. The newspaper reported that freedom-seekers continued to “flock” to Fort Donelson in large numbers.

The government has this matter badly mixed . . . throwing a grievous responsibility upon their shoulders . . . It does not allow the return of slaves to rebel masters nor does it allow a commander to decide whether a master is loyal or disloyal. It does not allow rations or clothing, issued to any beyond a certain number . . . As a matter of humanity many commanders on their own responsibility are issuing rations and clothing to them, but with all they suffer. Women and children cannot be clad from army stores. And in such

³⁰ Cimprich, 16, 17, and 37, A.C. Harding to W.S. Rosencrans, 22 January 1863, Letters Received, Department of the Cumberland, RG 393, NAB; G.A. Garfield to W.P. Lyon, 17 June 1863, 95, RG 393, vol. 172/214 DMT, NAB; W.W. Lowe, General Order No. 6, 30 January 1863, 211, RG 393, vol. 172/214, NAB; W.P. Lyon to C. Goddard, 13 July 1863, vol. 172/214, DMT, 88, NAB; and Kurt D. Bergemann, *Brckett’s Battalion: Minnesota Cavalry in the Civil War and Dakota War* (St. Paul, MN: Borealis Books, 2004). See also Ira Berlin, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South*, series I, volume III, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 652n.

places as this post they cannot be covered from the storms. Last night cold and stormy as it was, whole families are compelled to sleep out of doors.³¹

The presence of enslaved Africans and their persistence in moving to the river forts proved to be a turning point for slaves living in the region. Those who wanted the chance to escape bondage were now offered an opportunity to do so, in effect transitioning to a new way of life at forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson. The Union Army's presence hastened the demise of slavery; yet slaveholders' tenacity in attempting to hold on to a way of life and control their "property" required the active assistance of those sympathetic to the freedom-seeker's cause. This came in several forms at forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson, individual soldiers within the Union Army, civilians, and freedmen's aid societies all operating together to bring freedom to thousands.

After Grant's victories in 1862, the Union Army's presence at the forts increased the chances for runaway slaves to use the forts as "safe havens" from their masters or as "stations" on their journey to free territory. Military posts across Tennessee continued to serve as safe havens for the rest of the war. As early as November 1862, Colonel W.W. Lowe, headquartered at forts Henry and Heiman, asked for instructions on what should be done with 100 dollars left behind by Reverend Jerome Spilman chaplain of the 5th Iowa Cavalry for the safe passage of a runaway slave to Cincinnati. Reverend Spilman had been discharged from service, and the slave had since disappeared.³²

³¹ Troy (OH) *Times*, 18 December 1862.

³² Cimprich, 48-53; Stephen V. Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 109; Berlin, et al, 30-32, 381-386; for a discussion of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program and national parks with links to the history of the Underground Railroad, www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr; and W.W. Lowe to A.A.G., District of Columbus, 8 November 1862, vol. 172/214 DMT, 58, RG 393, NAB.

Runaway slaves used other means to escape. For instance, they might come to the fort for protection, but soon moved from the area to take a new job. Private Mitchel A. Thompson, 83rd Illinois Infantry, wrote to his wife that he had lost another cook. This time, the former slave had taken a job working on a steamboat for 45 dollars a month. The army itself provided opportunities for escape, especially when former slaves were detailed from Fort Donelson to load packet boats at Smithland, Kentucky, located north of the fort on the Ohio River. The disappearance of workers evidently became a regular occurrence, for orders were issued to prevent slaves from running away on boats.³³

Union recruiting parties were another way that slaves might escape from slave masters. Private Mitchel Thompson wrote in 1864 that “a squad of our men went out into Kentucky and gathered about 100 darky men and enlisted them in the United States service.” In 1863, soldiers impressed laborers for the construction of the Northwestern Railroad, a railroad line that ran just 40 miles south of Fort Donelson from Johnsonville on the Tennessee River to Nashville. Farmer J.B. Killebrew recorded that Union officer John Ivey and a squad of soldiers impressed two of his slaves and frightened all the others except the elderly, women, and children just when he was trying to harvest some of his crops. Ivey, according to slave owner Killebrew, was a “traitor to all his neighbors and friends and to the cause which they cherished.”³⁴

Civilians also assisted the freedom-seekers. Adelia Lyon, while visiting her husband, Colonel William P. Lyon, commander of the 71st Ohio, at Fort Donelson, helped at least one slave woman named Rachel escape to Chicago. Captain Channing Richards, 22nd Ohio Infantry, described how he met a local citizen “to obtain a complete

³³ Henderson, et al, 86; J.A. Garfield to W.P. Lyon, 17 June 1863, vol. 172/214, RG 393, NAB; and D.W. Swigart to J.W. Taylor, 21 June 1863, Letters Received, Department of the Cumberland, RG 393, NAB.

³⁴ Henderson, et al., 92 and Killebrew, 135, 155.

list of Negroes who [had] worked on the [Confederate] fort.” Richards explained that the man was someone who “wanted to help the boys get their freedom,” but that the man asked to remain anonymous because his actions “might cost him his life.” In another instance, Richards described a young female slave, brought to the Union camp at Clarksville, who had been beaten and shackled to a large log by her master. A local woman had given her shelter and tried to remove the leg shackle, but feared that she could hide the slave no longer.”³⁵

Even if slaves chose not to leave the region, they may have felt more confident about leaving their masters because of the Union Army’s presence. Sarah Kennedy, a Clarksville slave master, wrote her husband in 1863 about their former slaves: “Fanny and her husband have set up a regular establishment in Nashville. John is in a fine business house and Fanny is mistress of her own home. Phil is there also . . . Nashville seems to be the paradise and to get there the height of their aspirations.” Captain Channing Richards described how a slave named John escaped with him as his regiment evacuated Clarksville and headed south to join Grant’s command. The Clarksville slave master who owned John pursued the slave and the 22nd Ohio regiment to the Union camp at Pittsburgh Landing, near Shiloh, Tennessee. He petitioned General Grant for the return of his slave “property.” John fled to Memphis, fearing he would be returned to his slave owner. Later, Captain Richards learned that John had found work as a porter in a large Memphis commission house.³⁶

³⁵ Adelia Lyon, *Reminiscences of the Civil War: Civil War Correspondence of Colonel W.R. Lyon*, (San Jose, CA: Muirson & Wright, 1907), 95-96; and Channing Richards, “Dealing With Slavery,” in *Sketches of War History, 1861-1865*, Papers Prepared for the Ohio Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States (Cincinnati, 1896), 321- 325.

³⁶ Sarah A. Kennedy to David N. Kennedy, 5 October 1863, Sarah Bailey Kennedy Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, hereafter TSLA, and Richards, 323.

The arrival of the Union Army increased the slave's chance for escape from bondage. As more slaves continued to come to the forts, military commanders faced difficult decisions on how to balance the need to care for homeless, hungry slaves versus the hostile, but legal complaints of slave owners. All three forts served as "safe havens" for runaways until the end of the war. Their efforts in escaping slavery were aided by Union soldiers, soldier's wives, or by securing jobs that took them away from the region.

SUPPORTING THE WAR EFFORT

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Union victory at forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson for slaves in Kentucky and Tennessee was the opportunity to create new lives. For the first time, many slaves found themselves making their own decisions—finding places to live and building homes, finding jobs to support their families, and caring for and educating their children. Fort Donelson and the other Union camps served as transitions between an old way of life as a slave to a new life as a freedman or woman.

Although we may never know the total numbers of runaway men, women, and children that escaped to the Union camps, evidence suggests the numbers sometimes overwhelmed fort commanders. Evidently, enough people were coming to the forts that freedmen's camps were established soon after the surrender of Fort Donelson in February 1862. In August 1862, Private Napoleon de Bogert with the 13th Wisconsin Infantry, wrote the “devilish nigars [sic]” were “thicker in camp than the solders [sic].” Correspondence from Union officers and soldiers reveal some idea what was actually happening. For instance, Captain William Brunt, who enlisted first with the 83rd Illinois Infantry, recorded that he was “detailed to superintend [the] post contrabands” in November 1862 (Runaway and captured slaves were defined as “contrabands of war” by military officials). By July 1863, the number of runaways employed by the Quartermaster's Department as officer's servants and as company cooks numbered 275. This number does not include women or children at the Donelson camp, nor those possibly living at forts Henry and Heiman. In *Slavery's End in Tennessee*, John Cimprich estimates that approximately 300 runaways wintered at Fort Donelson in 1863.

Lieutenant James Moore, who replaced Brunt as superintendent of the Donelson freedmen's camp, reported that 395 workers labored for the United States Army at Fort Donelson in 1864.³⁷

As slave families moved to the Union forts, they found safety and work among the Union soldiers. At Fort Donelson as in other Union camps, African American men were employed as laborers, cooks, teamsters, officer's servants, and eventually recruited as soldiers. Details of laborers were sent from Donelson in July 1863 to repair the railroad at Cumberland City, the important rail connection near Dover. Women worked as laundresses, nurses, cooks, or seamstresses. Sgt. Major Thomas Baugh wrote to his wife that he paid two dollars a week for "two Negroe women to cook and wash." Men stationed at Forts Henry and Heiman grew so accustomed to the new laborers that they persuaded their commanding officer to allow former slaves to stay within the Union lines.³⁸

African Americans also supported the war effort by guarding cities and railroads, participating in raiding parties into Confederate territory, and serving as spies. Former slaves apparently served as guards at the river forts even before they officially were mustered in as soldiers. They were ordered to guard the post at Fort Henry in August 1862 after Confederate guerrillas captured the Union post at Clarksville and threatened Fort Donelson. Former slaves provided much-needed labor for the Union Army; an

³⁷ Napoleon de Bogert to parents, 31 August 1862, Fort Donelson National Battlefield, Dover, Tennessee; William Brunt, Compiled Service Record, 16th U.S.C.T., 3; Cimprich, 53; W.P. Lyon to Charles A. Thompson, 19 July 1863, 159, RG 393, pt. IV, NAB; and U.S. Congress, "The Report of the Commissioners of Investigation of Colored Refugees in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Alabama," *Senate Executive Documents*, 38 Congress, 2nd Session, No. 28, 12.

³⁸ William H. Mulligan, Jr., "African-American Troops in Far West Kentucky during the Civil War: Recruitment and Service of the 4th U.S. Hvy. Artillery Colored," presented at Fort Donelson National Battlefield, Dover, TN, 7 February 2003; W.P. Lyon to C.R. Thompson, 19 July 1863, vol. 172/216 DMT, 159, RG 393, NAB; W.W. Lowe, General Orders No. 9, 26 April 1863, vol. 172/214, 408, RG 393, NAB; Thomas J. Baugh to wife, 3 March 1863, Civil War Collection, TSLA; and Marshall Papers.

estimated 200,000 African American civilians or more labored in the service of the army. In fact, freedmen did much of the work on the new Union Fort Donelson, completed in September 1863. This fort was much smaller and located closer to the town of Dover than the earlier Confederate fort. Private Mitchel Thompson wrote that the “Negro Brigade” was responsible for building the new fort. The brigade worked from “7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. with an hour off for lunch.”³⁹

By 1863, African American men were being recruited as soldiers. An irate Trigg County, Kentucky slave holder and industrialist, Daniel Hillman, wrote to Brigadier General Jeremiah T. Boyle, commander of the District of Kentucky, accusing the Union commander at the three forts of “not protecting [his] person and property” because they would not return his slave property. Hillman wrote that he “found 14 of [his] Negroes—working in the Fort—several had left or were kept out of [his] way.” Hillman angrily reported that two at Fort Heiman were “sent off a short time before his arrival there—after being swor[n] in the service for 3 years.” Hillman added that his situation would only worsen, because 20 to 30 more slaves had left his farm, and that a commissioned officer awaited at the forts to enlist runaway slaves. Kentucky government officials suggested that the War Department move the recruiting stations further south and forbid officers in these camps to “receive Kentucky negroes within their lines.”⁴⁰

Opinions about former slaves as soldiers varied among the Union soldiers at the river forts and slave owners in Kentucky and Tennessee still continued to resist the emancipation of their slaves. For many Northern troops, garrison duty at the river forts

³⁹ Franklin, 221-224; Quarles, 205; Marshall Papers, 114; A.A. Smith to W.C. Russell, 2 August 1863, vol. 172/216, 167, RG 393, NAB; Cooling, *Fort Donelson's Legacy*, 296; Franklin, 222; Wallace, 142-143; Quarles, 94; and Henderson, et al., 60.

⁴⁰ Berlin, et al., *Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, series I, vol. II, 650-651; Michael T. Meier, in *Black Soldiers in Blue*, 264; and *O.R.*, Series III, Volume III, 19 December, 1863, 1174-1175.

was the first time they had even seen enslaved Africans. Often, their first impressions were recorded in letters to family members. Some troops saw the refugees as “ignorant, illiterate, and unkempt.” Prejudice was widespread in the Union ranks, as well on the Northern home front. White soldiers believed that former slaves could only serve as cooks, teamsters, work on fortifications, or clean latrines. Yet, some Union troops in Tennessee felt so strongly about forming African American companies that they petitioned military Governor Andrew Johnson, for they felt that “a great many blacks . . . [were] willing to engage in the service of their country.” Very few descriptions of the refugees were recorded by soldiers writing from the river forts from 1862 to 1865. What does exist is varied. Some accounts show sympathy to the slave’s oppressed condition, while other soldiers record denigrating comments about former slaves or recount the ill treatment of freedom-seekers by white troops.⁴¹

“. . . [T]here are two classes of people,” wrote Mitchel Thompson in 1863, “those who support slavery and those who opposed it. . . [some] think slavery is right and do not allow their consciences to interfere farther than ease and opulence is concerned; the other class are [sic] a set of men who look upon slavery as a curse to mankind, a curse to society both in a civil and religious sense.” For Thompson, the war was a moral issue about abolishing slavery. In May 1863, he wrote to his wife that when proslavery forces were “thoroughly brought to consider that slavery [was] the primary cause or the root of the matter and that to destroy the tree, root, and branch [was] the surest way to break this rebellion, then no doubt but God will bless efforts for crushing the rebellion.” Thompson

⁴¹ Ann J. Bailey, “The USCT in the Confederate Heartland, 1864,” in *Black Soldiers in Blue*, 227; John David Smith, “Let Us All Be Grateful,” *Black Soldiers in Blue*, 5, 12, 40-41; Howard C. Westwood, “Grant’s Role in Beginning Black Soldiery,” *Illinois Historical Journal* 79 (Autumn 1986): 207-209; and Cooling, *Fort Donelson’s Legacy*, 255.

was concerned about the behavior of some white troops against the former slaves that were eventually recruited at Fort Donelson: “They [Kentucky troops] are so down on darky troops. Their Col. who is a slave owner says he would sooner shoot a nigger [sic] than a rebel . . . We had to double our guard to keep them straight. . . It is said their Adjutant went to the steamers and told their barkeeper to give their Regiment as much liquour as they wanted. They would show the G-d d—d abolition, nigger [sic] stealing 83rd a trick or two . . . There has been more than one revolver drawn on them by our men” Colonel Neely, 5th Iowa Cavalry, “delivered” a whole family of runaways who had been hiding at Fort Henry to a local slave owner, wrote an upset Private Marshall in the summer of 1862. The owner was allowed by the Union command to make a search of the camp for his property.⁴²

Despite resistance by some white troops, full-scale recruitment actually began August 1863. Thompson wrote that “blacks were enlisting rapidly” and that “there [would] soon be a large force of them” at Fort Donelson. Former slave John Lott enlisted at the fort in the 13th U.S. Colored Infantry in September 1863. Andrew Jackson Smith was another one of those slaves who sought a new life with the army. Smith was living in Lyon County, Kentucky when he heard Grant’s army had arrived in the state. He walked to where the army was camped and he became the personal servant of Major John Warner, 41st Illinois, so that he would not be returned to his owner. Smith fought alongside Warner at forts Henry and Donelson and was later wounded at Shiloh. In 1863, he joined the 55th Massachusetts.⁴³

⁴² Henderson, et al., 31, 38-39, 76-77; and Marshall Papers.

⁴³ Henderson, et al, 63, 75-77; W. P. Lyon to W.C. Russell, 16 August 1863, 165, vol. 172/216, pt. IV, RG 393, NAB; A.A. Smith to W.C. Russell, 10 September 1863, 176, vol. 172/216, pt. IV, RG 393, NAB; E.C. Brott to A.A. Smith, 23 September 1863, 178, vol. 172/216, pt. IV, RG 393; Declaration for Pension,

Smith's story is similar to other enslaved Africans who came to Union strongholds for protection and work. Some runaway slaves from Tennessee and Kentucky recruited at forts Henry, Heiman, Donelson, and at Clarksville and surrounding areas formed enlisted in the 13th, 15th, and 16th and 17th United States Colored Infantry. By 1865, an estimated 200,000 men served in the Union Army, with over 20,000 recruited in Tennessee. Most of the Black regiments that were partially recruited at Fort Donelson and Clarksville participated in the Battle of Nashville (1864). One regiment, the 15th U.S. Colored Infantry, served fatigue duty at Bowling Green, Kentucky and guard duty near Springfield, Tennessee. The 13th U.S. Colored Infantry was ordered to construct the new Nashville and Northwestern Railroad, and guarded the rail line at Johnsonville, Tennessee during Nathan Bedford Forrest's raid in 1864. Most of the regiments remained on active duty until 1866.⁴⁴

Men from many of the white regiments who garrisoned the forts and Clarksville, such as the 71st Iowa, 83rd Illinois, and 5th Iowa Cavalry, were detailed to supervise the contraband camps. Some of these men by late 1863 were promoted as officers of Black regiments. Joseph A. Latimer wrote to his father in 1864 that several men in his regiment had applied to be officers in the Black regiments. William Brunt, first detailed to

Bureau of Pensions, May 31, 1912; John Lott, Private, 13th U.S. Colored Infantry, Co. 3, Soldier's Certificate No. 976220, Record Group 15, NAB; and Andrew Bowman, interview by paper's author, October 2003, Dover, Tennessee.

⁴⁴James M. Merrill, "Cairo, Illinois: Strategic Civil War River Port," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 76 (Winter 1983): 251-255; Quarles, 327; Descriptive List, 16th U.S.C.T., RG 94; A.A. Smith to R.D. Mussey, Regimental Letter, Endorsement, and Order Book, 16th U.S.C.T., Volume 3, RG 94; *Tennesseans in the Civil War*, Part I (Nashville, 1964), 398-404; and, W.B. Gaw to R.D. Mussey, 16th U.S.C.T. Regimental Book, RG 94.

superintend the camps at Donelson and Clarksville, was eventually promoted to captain of the 16th U.S.C. Infantry in December 1863.⁴⁵

An interesting incident was recorded by Captain Brunt in his service record. In February 1863 during the second Confederate attack on Dover, Generals Joseph Wheeler and Nathan Bedford Forrest led an assault against the small Union garrison, hoping to reclaim the fort and control of the Cumberland River. According to Captain Brunt, the former slaves were issued weapons, placed in the line of battle with Union soldiers, and were prepared to defend the fort. But when the fort's commander, Colonel Abner Harding, learned of what was happening, he ordered the freedmen to disarm. At least five of the freedmen ignored the colonel's order, picked up weapons from wounded Union soldiers, and rejoined the fighting to defend the fort. It can be speculated that these men were also defending their homes and families; for by this time, the freedmen's camp was well-established and located adjacent to the Union camp. This incident occurred months before former slaves were actually recruited into the United States army.⁴⁶

Runaway slaves were eager to support the Union Army. Men and women helped to build fortifications, repair railroads, and work as teamsters, cooks, and officer's servants. Eventually, African-American men served picket duty and enlisted as United States soldiers. Women worked as nurses, cooks, laundresses, or seamstresses. Although there was some resentment that Black men were being recruited into the army, full-scale recruitment began at the three forts in August 1863. The Union camps at Henry, Heiman,

⁴⁵ Joseph A. Latimer to J.C. Latimer, [1864], Latimer Family Papers, United States Army Institute Carlisle, PA and William Brunt, Compiled Service Record, 16th U.S. Colored Infantry, 2.

⁴⁶ Brunt, Compiled Service Record, 16th U.S. Colored Infantry, 2.

and Donelson were serving as transition sites for former slaves who were creating new lives without slave masters.

A NEW LIFE AT THE UNION CAMP

Runaway slaves and their families found work, but if they decided to stay near the Union camps, they also had to locate places to live. Since no photographic or archaeological evidence exists of any of the river forts, we may never fully know the exact location of their homes or understand the complexities of their lives. The best evidence suggests that the largest camp formed around the perimeter of the Union Fort Donelson. In a letter to his wife, Private Thompson described one home as a “shanty close by our post.” In March 1863, Lieutenant James Moore, superintendent of the camp between 1863-1864, reported that “three hundred colored persons” lived at the post, “eighty are men generally old and infirm, the balance are women and children.” Families lived in “huts they built by themselves,” and that “fifty gardens were planted, totaling seven-and-a-half acres.” Moore noted that the “men and boys were pretty well supplied with clothing, but the women [were] badly off.”⁴⁷

Until the new Fort Donelson was finished in 1863, freedmen and their families probably lived inside or near the city of Dover, which was occupied by Federal troops until August 1865. Since many of the homes and buildings in Dover were damaged during the Battle of Dover in 1863, African-American families, like other Dover families, suffered enormously. It is possible that African-Americans moved closer to the new Fort Donelson upon its completion. Postwar sketches of Dover and the proposed National Cemetery in 1867 confirm the location of an African-American school, church, and a few homes. This large area was referred to as the “Free State.” Property deeds dating from

⁴⁷ Henderson, et al., 92; and Indiana Freedmen’s Aid Commission, “Report of the Board of Managers,” (Indianapolis, 1864), 18. See also Cimprich, 52-56.

Fort Donelson National Battlefield's establishment in 1928 as a national park and the park's expansion during the 1960s show that this African-American community stretched from the location of the Union fort (now the National Cemetery) to the old Confederate earthworks and beyond. Benjamin Franklin Vanmeter, assigned to help identify the remains and document the burial of Union soldiers in 1867, described the "Free State" as a "settlement of colored people, numbering in all about 300 . . . They located here about the year sixty two and sixty three and are multiplying very fast." Military correspondence documents that the freedmen also had access to medical care. A nurse named Henry worked in the contraband hospital in July 1863. The African-American community, as well as the white soldiers garrisoning Fort Donelson, was overwhelmed by a smallpox outbreak in 1863.⁴⁸

The military eventually created a network of refugee camps across Tennessee, but the majority of former slaves tried to live as independently as possible, surviving "through their own efforts and luck." Data compiled by Cimprich in *Slavery's End in Tennessee* estimates that just over 7,000 freedmen were living in camps by 1865, with an additional 30,000 living in the cities of Chattanooga, Nashville, and Memphis. Captain William Brunt referred to many slaves living in Clarksville and Providence, both located thirty miles east of Dover. These communities were similar to the freedmen's camp at Dover; they were located near Union Fort Bruce or other places inside the city of Clarksville. Families lived near Union hospitals, churches, or empty tobacco warehouses.

⁴⁸ A.A. Smith to W.C. Russell, 4 September 1863, vol. 172/214 DMT, 172, RG 393, NAB; Robert Wallace, Chief Ranger, Fort Donelson National Battlefield, interview by the author, 15 July 2001, Dover, Tennessee; Wallace, 149; Brevet Colonel C.W. Folsom, Inspection Report No. 24, 17 August 1867, Sketch "D," RG 92, NAB; Benjamin Franklin Vanmeter Papers, 88, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, Florida; Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Verification of Deed and Acreage Records, Memorandum by Lawrence C. Hadley (April 1972) and Appraisal Report, Memorandum by Harding L. Smith (January 1974), Division of Land Acquisition (Washington, D.C.); W.P. Lyon to C. Goddard, 13 July 1863, vol. 172/214 DMT, 82-83, RG 393, NAB; Berlin, et al., 395-396; and Marshall Papers.

In an 1864 report to the Indiana Freedmen's Aid Commission, Brunt reminded commission workers not to forget runaway slaves living outside the camps, adding that they would suffer for clothing during the winter. No mention was made of freedmen and women living in Dover.⁴⁹

The most poignant stories about African-Americans appear in reports from Freedmen's Aid Societies and soldier's letters. Both the Western Freedmen's Aid Society and the Indiana Freedmen's Aid Association sent representatives and supplies to the camp at Fort Donelson between 1863 and 1865. These stories reveal that the people at this camp were industrious, eager to obtain an education, and to earn their own wages.

Education was a major priority for the freedmen's relief societies, as well as the former slaves. Teachers were paid by various relief organizations, but housing and food were provided by the military. The freedmen's school at Donelson received praise from teachers and military officials alike. For instance, Lt. James Moore reported to the Indiana Commission in March 1863 that "last Spring [1862] . . . a Sabbath school . . . had from eighty to one hundred scholars." Moore noted that some "learned so fast that they could read before the cold weather set in." In April 1863, Moore reported that he thought the school was doing well. "I noticed one class in the Second Reader that reads very well; everything is encouraging in the education department. There is in attendance the mother with her babe, and the mother with her daughter in the same class . . . This school will do much good." Teacher Ira Hutchens told the commission in April 1863 that the military authorities at Fort Donelson were "good and kind to [them] and are well pleased with the school. We draw rations monthly, which more than supply our wants,

⁴⁹ Cimprich, 31, 59; Ash, 136; Dr. Thomas H. Winn, interview by the author, 9 May 2002, Clarksville, Tennessee; and Indiana Freedmen's Aid Commission, 28-29.

and we have school rooms and rooms to cook and lodge in, free of charge.” Hutchens also reported that the Sabbath school numbered more than a hundred scholars, and that he believed that they should not “vacation at the end of three months,” as school was not in session during the winter months. By June 1863, Hutchens stated that the school had sold “twenty-six dollars worth of books to the scholars,” and needed more spelling books. Ella M. Groves, another Donelson teacher, commented that there were a “great many women . . . whose husbands were in the army, who want to come to school . . . They bring their little babes to school with them.” Teacher Ella Allen was impressed that her “scholars [were] learning so rapidly,” advancing beyond her expectations. Fort Donelson students even purchased their own books and collected enough money to build two schools and teachers’ quarters in 1863. The “contraband school [is] progressing very favorably,” wrote Private Mitchel Thompson in April 1863. “Some of them learn fast, in fact the blacks are going to outstrip the whites.” In one letter to his wife, Thompson even described how he sat across the kitchen table from his own cook, who was busy “pouring over his lesson.” The cook apparently kept his lessons by him all the time and used any opportunity he found to study. Thompson reported there were at least 100 students enrolled at the school in April 1864. Before school dismissed for the season, the students had an “exhibition of progress” for the soldiers. “Some little fellows who had never seen the letters before could read right plain and speak pieces they had committed to memory without flinching,” wrote Thompson.⁵⁰

In June 1864, Thompson again mentioned that the freedmen’s school was thriving. He felt that the school enticed slaves to come to the fort. Thompson shared the

⁵⁰ Indiana Freedmen’s Aid Commission, 18-20; Western Freedmen’s Aid Commission, *Second Annual Report* (Cincinnati, 1864), 28; and Henderson, et al., 79, 91, and 93.

story of a Kentucky slave owner who came to Fort Donelson in search of a young slave boy. The slave owner found the boy living near the Union fort. When questioning the boy as to why he had left the farm, the boy replied that “he had it in his head for a long time.” When asked whether he would return to the farm if he was paid for his work, the boy declined. Finally, the slave owner asked the boy why he was living at the fort. The boy replied that he was “going to school.” After the owner left, the young boy explained to Thompson that “old slave owners always told them that the Yanks would not school them, that they were not that kind of people.”⁵¹

The schools at the Clarksville and Providence (present-day New Providence, Tennessee) camps had similar experiences to the Donelson camp, except that they often had larger attendance. These schools, as well as the Union camps garrisoned in these cities, have important connections to Forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson. The 83rd Illinois Infantry occupied this area for much of the remainder of the war, occupying all three river forts, Clarksville, and Fort Bruce in Providence. Captain Brunt wrote to the Western Freedmen’s Aid Commission in March 1864 that his “field embrace[d] all the colored people at [the] post—the camp, Clarksville, and Providence—also the colored people at Fort Donelson.” Some of the teachers at the Clarksville and Providence schools described the overcrowded conditions of the refugee camps and the “dirty, ragged” conditions of the children. Teachers particularly faced the difficulty of maintaining order in the classroom at Providence, while constantly receiving new students. “New scholars are coming in every week, who have never been taught anything but tryanny [sic],” reported teacher Esther Newlin.⁵²

⁵¹ Henderson, et al., 92.

⁵² Western Freedmen’s Aid Commission, 28; and Indiana Freedmen’s Aid Commission, 21-22.

The locations of the actual freedmen's camps have never been verified. The best evidence suggests that freedmen and their families lived in shanties, abandoned homes in Dover, or huts they built adjacent to the camps at Henry, Heiman, and Donelson. The camp at Fort Donelson, which was called the Free State, was the largest as well as the community that lasted well into the 1880s. The freedmen's communities were dependent upon the protection of the Union Army and relied on the Army to help with medical care, establishing hospitals, and issuing some food. Freedmen's Aids societies did send representatives to assist freedmen in building schools. Thus, benevolent societies and military assistance laid the groundwork for the successful transition from slavery. But it was the tenacity and determination of slaves—to live independently of former owners, to earn an education, and to find jobs—that best illustrates what freedom meant to the men, women, and children living at forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson.

THE END OF WAR AND POSTWAR PROGRESS

Freedmen's Aid reports, newspapers, military correspondence, diaries, and pension records all reveal how some slaves made the transition from slaves to wage earners between 1862 and 1868. Some African-Americans worked for former slave owners, some were able become small business owners, while others eventually became land owners. However, the majority of freedmen supported themselves by sharecropping. Employers (landlords) provided the land, tools, or provisions in exchange for the freedmen's labor.⁵³

Military authorities also assisted freedmen in finding jobs when they controlled the region. An announcement in the Nashville *Union* directed individuals interested in hiring female servants to contact the headquarters of the Commissioner for Organization of U.S. Colored Troops. At the Clarksville camp, Captain Brunt also arranged for women to be hired out to earn wages. He reported that more than two hundred seamstresses were hired out between June and July 1864. Brunt also wanted to employ African-American women at the proposed Clarksville Orphans Home, offering them "three or four dollars per month, and comfortable plain clothing." Ironically, these same women had already been caring for the orphans, probably since the camp's formation in 1862. Brunt thought that an organized Orphans Home, administered by Mary Grim of Farmington, Illinois was the best solution for the "poor, little orphan children in camp, so poorly clad and poorly cared for by the colored women." The need for an orphan's home illustrated the fact that many children were simply abandoned during the war years, often

⁵³ Boles, 209-211; and Quarles, 282-285.

because families could not support them. African American women often turned to prostitution as a means to support themselves and children.⁵⁴

African-American women also taught school at Clarksville. Brunt stated that he felt confident that Kitty Fields and Lucy Claggett were capable of training additional teachers for the other schools at the Clarksville and Providence camps. He also petitioned the Western Freedmen's Aid Commission to accept them as teachers, presumably so they could receive wages for their work. African-American men worked for the United States Army during the war and postwar they were hired to help locate and re-inter Union soldiers at the National Cemetery. They worked as teamsters and laborers.⁵⁵

Private Thompson wrote in April 1864 that "all parties [were] doing better than they ever were before" because one iron furnace in Stewart County had resumed operation, giving their hands \$10.00 per month, clothing, food, and land for a "garden and truck patch." In Thompson's assessment, this system was "much better to reward labor and skill" than to compel involuntary servitude. John Lott and Joseph Dorris, former privates with the 13th U.S.C.T., returned to work in the iron furnace industry in the postwar years. By the early 1870s, five furnaces were fully functional within Stewart County. The Woods, Yeatman, and Company, highly prosperous before the war, re-built the blast stack at the Bear Spring community in 1873 and exclusively employed Black laborers.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Nashville *Union*, 5 December 1863; Indiana Freedmen Aid Commission, 30; and Lucas, 109.

⁵⁵ Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, 28; and Folsom, Inspection Report, 1.

⁵⁶ Henderson, et al., 79; Lott Pension Record, Joab (Joseph) Dorris, Private, Soldier's Certificate No. 637-988, Company B, 13th U.S. Colored Infantry, Case Files of Approved Pension Application, 1866-1930, RG 15, NAB; and Ash, 34-36.

Clarksville farmer J.B. Killebrew drew up “rules and regulations” for his workers and had these rules endorsed by the Agent of the Freedmen’s Bureau. Workers were contracted to work his farm, were paid either by the job or an established monthly wage, with provisions to supply food. Killebrew gave each employee a book so each worker would have a record of all the earned wages. He thought he “got along well” with his workers, but it was a long time before they fully trusted him and believed that he would not cheat them from their wages. This system apparently was not always satisfactory because Killebrew and other farmers developed a scheme in 1867 to travel to Germany to lure immigrants to work the land.⁵⁷

The situation was similar at Wessynton Plantation. The first contracts between former slaves and the Washington family were signed in 1867. Black families provided the labor, cared for the tools and equipment, were required to build rail fences around their crops and keep the fences weed-free in exchange for farming 40-60 acre tracts of land. They received one-third of the crop proceeds. If the former slave family owned their own horses or mules to work the land, they received two-thirds of the crop proceeds. The Washington family also paid some former slaves daily wages.⁵⁸

Some African Americans never returned to the farms or iron furnace communities, instead they stayed near Fort Donelson in the postwar period, working the same jobs, attending school, and living in homes near the old forts. Apparently, the community flourished for a while. Benjamin Franklin Vanmeter, U.S. Quartermaster Corps, detailed to work with the “burial party” helping to locate and move the remains of Union soldiers to the new National Cemetery, recorded that many Black laborers worked

⁵⁷ Killebrew, 158.

⁵⁸ Orser and Babson, 44-45.

with the army. This work began in 1866 and was completed in 1868. The outbreak of smallpox in the African-American community again in 1865-1866 worried the Stewart County Court so much that they appointed a committee to investigate the severity of the disease and discuss how to alleviate the disease from spreading throughout the county. By 1867, the Court ordered that reimbursement for the care of the sick indigents be authorized to George Stewart, one of the Bureau agents.⁵⁹

At least one school near Fort Donelson was documented on maps in 1867. Vanmeter wrote that former slaves were “anxious to gain knowledge,” noting that laborers with the burial crew carried either New Testaments or spelling books as they worked. Vanmeter also referred to the existence of the “M.E. Church” [African Methodist Episcopal] where one laborer, Columbus Brown, was a member. Brown and Vanmeter talked about many things, including Brown’s wish to immigrate to Liberia. Vanmeter said that he gave Brown a “poor encouragement and told him the sunny clime and green fields of Tennessee under protection of the Federal Government ought to be all one could ask and a sufficient home for any one who dared to live and labor.”⁶⁰

The *Goodspeed Histories* reported that 884 Black pupils were enrolled at 13 schools in Stewart County in 1885. Only two schools locations are mentioned in this account: the Furnace school [La Grange Furnace] and the Dover school.⁶¹

In the postwar period, African-Americans established separate churches in Stewart County. Three African Methodist Episcopal congregations were established near Dover, one at the Bear Spring community, one at the La Grange Furnace, and one north of Dover. Two Baptist church congregations were established in the county also. The

⁵⁹ Vanmeter Papers, 13, 47; and Stewart County Court Records, January 1866 and January 1867.

⁶⁰ Folsom, Inspection Report, Sketch “C,” RG 92, NAB.

⁶¹ *Goodspeed Histories*, 915-196, 918.

African Methodist Episcopal faith tended to be very politically active during the Reconstruction period in Tennessee, pushing for civil and political equality for all. By 1868, A.M.E. churches were established in every southern state. Only two churches remain in Stewart County today, both located near the perimeter of Fort Donelson National Battlefield.⁶²

Some African American men continued to serve as occupying troops to maintain order in Clarksville until 1866. The 15th U.S. Colored Infantry, partially formed at Clarksville, was detailed to the Stewart-Montgomery county line in January 1866 to maintain order after reports of violence against African-American families and a school in that area.⁶³

Efforts by the Freedmen's Bureau began later in Kentucky, not really affecting conditions for freedmen until 1866. In Tennessee, the Bureau began its work in 1865. Emancipation was not easy: "slavery died hard" in both states. Often, the first issue that faced any Freedmen's Bureau agent was convincing slave owners that they had to release their former slaves. Most viewed the Bureau as an enemy. Federal "interference" in the employer-worker relationship was particularly intolerable for many former slave owners.⁶⁴

In Trigg County, Kentucky, some former owners continued to hold people in bondage until June 1866. Similar situations occurred in Stewart County, Tennessee. Indentures of African-American children had become a common practice. In February

⁶² Ibid., 920; and *Powerful Artifacts: A Guide to Surveying & Documenting Rural African-American Churches in the South* (Murfreesboro, TN: Center for Historic Preservation, 2000), 8.

⁶³ Frank Hodgson, "Northern Missionary Aid Societies, The Freedmen's Bureau, and Their Effect on Education in Montgomery County, Tennessee," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 43 (December 1989) 36.

⁶⁴ Lucas, 206; Victor Howard, *Black Liberation in Kentucky: Emancipation & Freedom, 1862-1884* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983) 160; Cimprich 120-123, 131; and Franklin, 235-236.

1866, the Stewart County Court rescinded all such indentures and charged citizens to comply with Bureau contracts for workers. For some, the possibility of re-uniting their families was impossible, even if the Bureau intervened. Catherine Riley was trying to regain custody of her child from owner James Riley, of Logan County, Kentucky. When the mother and child were trying to return home to Montgomery County, Tennessee, she was beaten severely and the child carried away by Riley so the child would be “out of the reach of the d---d Yankees.” Bureau Superintendent George Stewart for Stewart County reported in August 1866 that two children, Ellen and Lewis Woods, were abducted by their previous owners Thomas and John Greenwood. All that their father, Robert Woods, could do was to apply to the Bureau agent in Trigg County, Kentucky. Incidents of race-related crimes are recorded throughout the reports made by Bureau agents. Agents in Stewart and Montgomery Counties reported armed robberies at the Rough and Ready Furnace and the Johnson and Company Ironworks in early 1866. Perhaps agents with more patience and compassion might have helped the volatile situation: Montgomery County Agent Joshua Cobb recorded in March 1867 that “the disposition on the part of many colored people [was] to linger about this [Clarksville] and I presume other cities; Can any remedy for this evil (for sure it is an evil) be found[?]”⁶⁵

Joseph Dorris’s life might provide an insight into how a former slave used the Union military camps as a refuge and transition point for starting a new life. Dorris, born a slave in Benton County, Tennessee, married Rachel Travers, from Stewart County, sometime before the war began. After the Union victory in February 1862, Dorris, his wife and two daughters, moved from Benton County (where they were owned by Will

⁶⁵Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Tennessee, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, Record Group 105, Register of Outrages, October 1865-July 1868, NAB; and Stewart County Court Records, February 1866.

and Bud Dorris) to Fort Donelson. Dorris worked for the Union Army (probably the Quartermasters Corps) on the “breastworks [earthworks] of the fort.” In 1863, Dorris joined the 13th U.S.C.T., perhaps at Donelson or Clarksville (where he enlisted is not recorded in the pension record). He was discharged at Nashville in 1866. Dorris and his family first moved to Memphis, then back to Henry County, and later to Stewart County where he worked at the Bear Springs Furnace owned by Woods, Yeatman & Company. His wife Rachel died and was buried somewhere in the county. Dorris apparently met the woman who would become his second wife, Caroline Smith, when he and his family were first living at Fort Donelson in 1862. Dorris and Caroline Smith were married in 1875 after the death of his first wife. They were married somewhere near the old Fort Donelson site. The Dorris’ moved to Clarksville where he worked as a laborer until he was disabled because of injuries to his left hand. Dorris and his second wife Caroline are buried at the Mount Olivet Cemetery in Clarksville.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Joab (Joseph) Dorris Pension Record.

CONCLUSION

The 1862 Campaign for Forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson should be viewed as an important turning point for thousands of enslaved Africans who were living in Stewart County, Tennessee and Calloway County, Kentucky. Some historians argue that the immediate impact of Civil War and emancipation resulted in more difficulties for African-Americans than they had experienced prior to the war. White Southerners sought new ways to promote racial superiority and there was increased violence toward freedmen and women as were efforts to prevent freedmen from voting. However, the loss of forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson in February 1862 immediately allowed slaves greater opportunities to escape the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers region or to begin new lives near the Union-occupied forts. It is true that this transition from slavery was not easy. But, those African-Americans who persisted found jobs, built homes, and established churches and schools near Fort Donelson between 1862 and 1865. They supported the army by helping to build a new fort at Dover in 1863 and worked as laborers for the Quartermasters Department. By 1863, Fort Donelson, along with forts Henry and Heiman, became recruiting stations for formerly enslaved men, supplying Black troops that would defend Nashville from Confederate attack in 1864 and help guard railroads and supply lines across Middle Tennessee and Western Kentucky.⁶⁷

Long-term changes were overwhelming for many African American families, as well as the former slave owners and whites living in the region. While many whites wanted a return to normalcy, African-Americans sought to find a new place in a society that was economically shattered and racially charged. Some families stayed near the old

⁶⁷ Boles, 206-207.

Union Fort Donelson until at least 1890. Further study is needed to determine what life was like for these African Americans, i.e., how long they stayed in the areas surrounding the old forts, if their economic conditions were similar to white Americans, and if they did leave the area, why they did so. Some of this information can be taken from census and county court records. If remnants of older African American communities exist, ancestors of these families might be interviewed. Most African-Americans during this time “tried out their freedom” by moving to find family members, to safer areas under the control of the Freedmen’s Bureau, or re-locating to find work in the city to avoid returning to farm work. Some Black refugees were even forcibly removed from areas.⁶⁸

No primary source materials, written from the perspectives of the slaves living in the areas examined by this study, were located. The few sources that describe the conditions of antebellum slavery for this area come from wartime accounts of Union soldiers, military correspondence of the 5th Iowa Cavalry, 71st Ohio, and 83rd Illinois Infantries, Northern newspaper accounts or newspapers published by the Union Army in Tennessee. Narratives from former slaves who were born and worked in Western Kentucky (Ballard and Hickman Counties) may offer the best evidence to describe how slaves lived in Kentucky and Tennessee. No slave narratives were found that describe life for slaves in Middle Tennessee (Stewart County).⁶⁹

As skilled and unskilled laborers for iron furnaces, former slaves developed communities and networks to other furnaces in the Kentucky and Tennessee. The evidence presented in this paper illustrates that this may have been so in the postwar period. A study of the postwar iron furnace operations might reveal names or living

⁶⁸ Ibid., 199-205, 239-240, and Lovett, 72-73.

⁶⁹ *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves, Ohio, Virginia, and Tennessee*, vol. 16 (St. Clair, MI: Scholarly Press, Inc., 1976), 26-32, 74-76.

conditions of former slaves and their families. Some furnaces resumed operation by the 1870s, such as the La Grange, Bear Spring, and Carlisle Furnaces. It might also be useful to investigate the iron masters like Daniel Hillman, John Bell, George Stacker, or George Lewis to see if any correspondence, either prior to the war or after, discusses slavery at their operations. Some correspondence about furnace operations owned by the Lewis family is available at the Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

A thorough study of United States Colored troop rosters for men recruited at forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson and in Clarksville, plus their pension records (if available) would probably provide much information on how former soldiers and their families survived in the late 19th century, where they lived and worked, and whether they remained in the area.

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