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**Southern Slave vs. Military Laborer:
Black Ambivalence Toward Joining the Union Army**

**by
Lisa Clark**

April 17, 1996

Fort Sumter was under fire! The war was on! The news flashed through the cotton fields and tobacco plantations of the South. For most slaves, the commencement of the Civil War brought hope. Enslaved, oppressed, denied education and self-determination, the southern black looked with eagerness to his emancipation. In many cases, the negro slave desired to help fight his former owners, to bring down the institution of slavery. Imagine his surprise, then, upon greeting the northern army with open arms, only to be forced to serve the white officers, cook for and clean up after the troops, and perform hard, manual labor for the military. There was no glory on the battlefield. Promises made for equal pay were broken so many times they became meaningless. The mixed emotions engendered by this reality resulted in confusion and contradiction. Blacks fought and petitioned to be allowed to join the Union army. Blacks fought and petitioned to be released from their impressment into the military. In either case, the negro was subject to the needs and wishes of the white man.

No sooner had the Union armies entered Confederate territory than they encountered slaves. These slaves had either run away from their masters or been abandoned in the flight of the southerners from the approaching army. The plight of these deserted negroes was dealt with in a variety of ways--almost as various in number as the different field commanders. While some commanders carried on long correspondence with Washington, others merely acted out their own wishes in regard to the growing numbers of misplaced negroes and waited for confirmation of their actions from the government.

This picture conjures up several questions. What was the attitude on the part of the federal government and the military establishment toward the use of former slaves as soldiers

in the Union army? What was the fate of the thousands of displaced former slaves? Was an effort ever made to recruit southern blacks (slaves) into the army? If so, what were the methods used? What was the reaction of the slaves to this recruitment? The answers to these questions are complex.

I

Abraham Lincoln had not run for president as an abolitionist, but merely against the expansion of slavery, and for the first two years of the war he acted consistently with this principle. During these early years he and those close to him were afraid of offending the border states and so were careful to advise the commanders to return any fugitive slaves—even in the southern states—to their masters.¹ It was even against the military policy of some of these commanders (and certainly they were supported in this by Washington) to even allow these fugitives to cross the Union army lines.²

George Williams, a black colonel in the Union army (and later a pioneer black historian) portrayed Lincoln as far behind the rest of the country (as well as Congress) on the issue of slave recruitment into the military. He viewed the Confiscation Act of 1861, as well as many letters from Secretary of War Seward (who, throughout the war, seems to have been very supportive of the use of negroes as soldiers and their parity with white men), as demonstrating

¹Hargrove, Hondon B. *Black Union Soldiers in the Civil War*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1988) p. 15.

²*War of the Rebellion: Official Records*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899), Ser. 1, Vol. 15, p. 442-444.

an open-mindedness on the part of other governmental agencies.³ This was reflected in a conflict between General Fremont and Lincoln. When Fremont declared the property of the rebels to be contraband, he also proclaimed the slaves of Missouri to be "free men." But the president objected to the line "slaves . . . hereby declared free men" and, according to Williams, "cut the heart" out of Fremont's proclamation in an executive letter of his own.⁴

But public attitudes, as expressed through newspapers such as the *National Intelligencer* and Washington papers, seemed to be pessimistic. Popular opinion had it that the blacks sought to avoid battle.⁵ Although these newspaper accounts seem to ignore the fact that slaves attached themselves to the Union troops whenever they came into slave territory and that contrabands flooded into army camps, they also seem to contradict Williams' thesis that the president lagged behind the rest of the country in attitudes toward the use of black soldiers. Clearly there were differing views of the subject on every level.

The factious opinions on the use of blacks in the military and the Union army's policy toward slaves is epitomized in the correspondence of Major General Benjamin Butler and Brigadier General J.W. Phelps. General Butler was the commanding Union officer in Louisiana during 1862, and had not yet developed the liberal stance toward blacks that he came to have later in the war. The controversy between himself and his subordinate officer, General Phelps, began with a letter of complaint to Butler regarding the conduct of Phelps' men.

³Williams, George W. *A History of the Negro Troops*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1888), pp.85-87.

⁴Williams, pp. 73, 74.

⁵Cornish, Dudley T. *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army*. pp. 81, 82.

Edward Page, a captain in the 31st regiment, wrote that the soldiers weren't allowing negroes on the plantations to be punished in the traditional ways. One negro had been convicted of burning down his mistress's barn and when he was about to be whipped for this crime, the soldiers under Phelps' command intervened and prevented it. Not only this, but the soldiers would break into local prisons and release the negroes being held. This behavior was upsetting the local whites and undermining the position of the Union army. Page requested that Phelps be commanded to take tighter rein of his men.⁶

This report provoked a series of letters in May of 1862 from Butler to Phelps telling him not to allow any person, black or white into or out of the camps without reason or employment. Lists were to be made of the authorized persons and anyone else passing the military lines was to be arrested as a POW or sent away. Butler could only conceive of the slaves as being useful for labor and so admonished that "every officer so reported employing servants will have the allowance for servants deducted from his pay roll."⁷

Phelps, meanwhile, expressed his desire for blacks to be organized into military companies. He requested equipment, clothing, and arms enough for three regiments of men. The southern loyalists had provided money beyond what the U.S. government allotted, but not the men, and the blacks should be allowed to fight since they were eager to do so. He felt that blacks not put to use in the military would use their spare time and energy to mount rebellions

⁶OR, Ser. 1, Vol. 15, pp. 446-447.

⁷OR, Ser. 1, Vol. 15, pp. 442-444.

against all forms of government.⁸

Butler was of the mind that the negroes could best be used as military laborers, not as a fighting force. In August 1862, he ordered Phelps to use the thousands of negroes that came flocking to his camps for cutting down trees, digging ditches, and repairing bridges. Phelps immediately wrote a letter of resignation. He said that he would not impress these men to do what they did not want. They would be more beneficial as soldiers than as burdens on governmental resources. But Butler turned down Phelps' request for resignation. An indignant Phelps wrote back that he was now involved in double slavery, being forced to go against his own conscience as well as enslaving the blacks.⁹ The controversy between these two men didn't end until General Butler was transferred out of Louisiana.

David Hunter, Commander of the Department of the South, was the source of another colorful incident in June, 1862 regarding differences of views on the use of slaves as soldiers. Hunter was actively recruiting blacks as soldiers for his regiments in Kentucky. A resolution was introduced into the House of Representatives by Congressman Wickliffe proposing an inquiry into Hunter's actions. Was he organizing "fugitive slaves?" Did he have the authority, and had he been furnished with the proper equipment for such an organization? Commander Hunter gave a most ironic response. He acknowledged no fugitive slaves under his jurisdiction.

⁸Brigadier General J.W. Phelps to Captain R.S. Davis, 30 July 1862, #19 1862, Letters Received, ser. 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt.1 {C-500}, in Berlin, Ira. *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867*. (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University, 1990) Series II, Vol. I p. 62.

⁹Brigadier General J.W. Phelps to Major General B.F. Butler, 2 Aug. 1862, G-476 1862, Letters Received, ser. 12, RG 94 {K-27}, in Berlin, Series II, Vol. I, p. 64.

Instead, he said there were only fugitive masters. He had been given authority to organize whomever he could to fight for the Union and funds to equip whatever regiments he could raise--no specification had ever been given as to color. The loyal negroes had formed one regiment and were "eager beyond all things to take the field."¹⁰ Although indignant at Hunter's reply, there was little the Hon. Mr. Wickliffe could do to censure the general since the government's policy was already turning his way.

The above exceptions notwithstanding, the most prevailing military policy prior to 1863 was the return of runaway slaves to their masters. When labor was needed, loyal southerners would have to be reimbursed for the use of their slaves. The order in Tennessee regarding the recruitment of laborers was that free and "roaming" negroes were to be employed as well as those belonging to rebels. If a negro belonged to a loyal master, his wages were to go to his master. This order also stipulated that as far as possible these hired laborers were to be used for the manual work instead of soldiers. The problem came in deciding which masters were loyal and which were rebels.¹¹

In Louisiana and the Gulf area the people were loyal to the Union and the laws of property rights applied to them--but they owned slaves. General Butler saw his way clear to offer board and protection to the slaves of disloyal masters who came within his lines. But he clearly saw them as property and says it was "manifestly unjust to make a virtual confiscation

¹⁰[David Hunter] to Edwin M. Stanton, 23 June 1862, vol. 10 DS, pp. 65-69. Letters Sent, ser. 4088, Dept of the South, RG 393, Pt. 1 {C-148}, in *OR*, Ser. 3. Vol. 2, pp. 147, 148.

¹¹General Orders, No. 6, Head Quarters Dept. of the Cumberland, 27 Jan. 1863, vol. 45A DC, pp. 8-10, General Orders, ser. 940, Dept. of the Cumberland, RG 393 Pt. 1 [C403], in Berlin, Series I, Vol.III, pp. 390,391.

of this species of property."¹² At the beginning of 1861 the war was seen by most northerners as purely military. The Union was at risk and its preservation was vital--slavery and its abolition were no object. But, as demonstrated by Hunter and Phelps, by the middle of 1862 slavery had become an issue--for both military and (in the case of Phelps) moral reasons.

II

The developing policy of using negroes in the military was an example of practical politics. The administration's opposition to their use reflected the opinion of much of the general population. The problem with using free, northern blacks was that so much prejudice existed among the northerners that many at first refused to serve with blacks. Recruitment of former slaves was taboo because of the administration's middle-of-the-road policy (trying to support both those against slavery and those in favor of it by opposing only the EXPANSION of slavery). In this case, the property rights of southern owners must be respected and slaves couldn't be recruited from these ranks. But this lukewarm policy, attempting to please two opposite views, pleased no one. The moral pressure of the abolitionists, the war-weariness of the typical northern soldier (who was willing in many cases to allow ANYONE to relieve him of military duty--black or white), the proven effectiveness of the blacks in the armies of Phelps and Hunter, and the military necessity of depriving the South of its ready labor force, changed the attitude of the nation and the administration gradually until the Emancipation Proclamation was issued in the fall of 1862¹³

¹²OR, pp. 439-442

¹³Note: The first legal recruitment of blacks had taken place in anticipation of the Emancipation Proclamation when the War Department authorized General Saxton of the Sea

Advocates of military use of blacks had sometimes estimated that an army of 700,000 black recruits could be raised almost instantly to help stamp out the rebellion.¹⁴ The actual number was less than one-third that number. Of the 186,000 men recruited, 134,111 were from the slave states. But 551,989 were from the North.¹⁵ Most of these had been free men. The military experience, especially as regards recruitment, was much different for the former slaves than it was for the freedmen.

The first free blacks to be used in the Civil War were used by the Confederate army. They were the Louisiana Native Guard, created out of educated, free Creoles in New Orleans. They were to be used largely for propaganda purposes, and never saw battle under the Confederate flag. But after New Orleans fell to the Union, Benjamin Butler called them back into service for the North.¹⁶ They had black officers, most of them prominent citizens in Louisiana. But the Union soldiers, who were just getting used to the idea of serving with blacks, refused to show respect to the officers. They were mocked, ignored, and disobeyed. Finally, all but two of the original officers resigned in protest of their treatment.¹⁷ The rest of

Islands in late 1862 to enlist blacks on the same pay scale as whites. Although this equality of benefits never materialized, it did result in hundreds of freedmen volunteering for service. Not only was this the first legal recruitment, but it was the first taste blacks had of disappointed hopes and broken promises in regard to payment (Cornish, p.80)

¹⁴Ervin L. Jordan, Jr. *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia*. (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, 1995) p. 265.

¹⁵Leon F. Litwack. *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*. (New York: Random House, 1979) p. 97.

¹⁶James G. Hollandsworth. *The Louisiana Native Guard*. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 1995) p. 15.

¹⁷Hollandsworth, p. 43, 44.

the Guard saw little action throughout the rest of the war, but did distinguish themselves remarkably well at the battle of Port Hudson.¹⁸

Frederick Douglass and other northern recruiters were sure there would be an overwhelming amount of volunteers among free blacks in the North once the administration allowed them to join. The 54th Massachusetts Regiment was raised, and conducted themselves bravely in battle. But after the 55th was mustered, there was little enthusiasm among free northern blacks. Besides the normal human reluctance to join the army shown among ethnic groups at this time, northern blacks had additional reason to hesitate. Some realized that after the war would come the real fight for freedom and wanted to preserve as many intellectuals as possible toward that day.¹⁹

Another consideration was the fact that blacks weren't paid as much as whites. While southern and northern blacks felt this discrimination alike, the northern recruits were loudest in their complaints. They seemed to expect more equal treatment than did the former slaves. Some of the newly-liberated slaves noticed this and felt that the northern soldiers' motives were less pure than those of the former slaves.²⁰

Although northern blacks were now subjected to the draft under the same terms as whites, they couldn't be induced to join the army in greater numbers than whites. The problem of filling the army remained and so recruiters turned to the increasing number of blacks in slave

¹⁸Hollandsworth, p. 54.

¹⁹Litwack, p. 79.

²⁰Litwack, p. 84.

states coming under the control of the Union army. These could be more easily coerced to join because their status was uncertain. Whites often paid recruiters to find black replacements for their draft positions by going to the South and deceiving or forcing blacks to don the Northern blue.²¹

The key to the impressment policy that the slaves were considered contraband. One of the first to define them as such was Captain Tallmadge, who advised General Butler at Fort Monroe to confiscate the slaves because they were being used to build rebel fortifications. Before 1862, Butler had seen the slaves as property that needed to be returned to its owner when it ran away. But Tallmadge's argument convinced him that the slaves were property which should be taken away from the rebel owners.²² The Confiscation Act of August 1861 promoted the seizure of anything aiding the South. Slaves who were military laborers were included in this as contraband. Thousands poured into Union army camps and worked for wages as laborers.²³ Although many felt the move toward allowing runaway slaves to stay within the military lines was positive, Williams read a sinister motive involved. The negroes were listed along with animals, wagons, and food as rebel property and it was under this justification that they were accepted as contraband and no longer returned to the southerners.²⁴

III

After the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863, the

²¹Litwack, p. 73.

²²Williams, pp. 68,69.

²³Hargrove, p.13.

²⁴Williams, p. 72.

recruitment of negroes from both the North and the South into the Union Army began in earnest. The draft acts throughout the Civil War made provision for the blacks to fight, but never specifically called for them until February 24, 1864. In August of 1863, however, Judge Holt ruled that Negroes were citizens and subject to military service. Although some state laws still regarded them as property, they could be enlisted even in those states because in war the government is allowed to appropriate private property for its own use.²⁵

General Lorenzo Thomas (Adjutant General of the U.S. Army) was an early recruiter of former slaves. During 1863 he toured around the portions of Mississippi in under Union control giving speeches to recruit white officers and negro soldiers. He talked to the white troops, attempting to moderate any prejudicial attitudes. His mission was not so much to recruit as it was to break down prejudice and to educate white soldiers. Others did the actual recruiting and setting up of the regiments, but by the end of the war he was responsible for initiating the recruitment of 40% of all colored troops.²⁶

William Matthews, a black recruiter in Kansas (where many blacks, both free and slave had settled in the 1850s), wrote a letter after the Emancipation Proclamation that demonstrated the high hopes of many of the blacks during this early period of recruitment. Along with two others he had raised a colored company, and on the strength of a promise given by General James H. Lane he had vowed to staff it with colored officers. The president's proclamation left no legal obstacles for him to become an officer, but none had been chosen and all the men

²⁵Williams, p. 138.

²⁶Cornish, pp. 123-125.

expected him to become their military commander. Accordingly, Matthews' letter requested a commission and asked "for Justice regardless of my color--as we are all fighting for the same great and glorious cause."²⁷ One can see that although Hunter had been a pioneer in the business of recruiting black soldiers, the Emancipation Proclamation had changed everything. Not only would the blacks be soldiers, but they were promised to be treated equally in every respect. This motivated hundreds to join the Union forces.

But the military was often more excited about the use of blacks as laborers than as fighting men. As the war progressed, it became obvious that the blacks were being recruited to do the hard work, not to fight. Needless to say, there was not as large a rush to enlist when the prospects were not the glory of the battlefield, but ditch-digging and camp clean-up. In these cases, impressment became the norm. In Kentucky, slavery was still legal and the sticky question arose of how to handle slaves of loyal owners. Blacks were needed as laborers, and so the government offered the owners a deal. In November 1863, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton sent a telegram to Brigadier General Boyle in Louisville ordering the impressment of slaves as laborers for the military. Loyal owners would be paid \$300 for their slaves, who would then be paid \$10 a month and given their freedom at the end of their enlistment.²⁸ Boyle responded positively, stating that the owners would much rather have their slaves be teamsters than soldiers. Many of the slaves had escaped or been impressed along the military roads already,

²⁷William D. Matthews to Hon. James H. Lane, 12 Jan. 1863, filed with K-138 1864, Letters Received, ser. 360, Colored Troops Division, RG 94 {91}, in Berlin, Ser. I, Vol.III, pp. 69,70.

²⁸Edwin M. Stanton to Brigadier General Boyle, 18 Nov. 1863, filed as B-352 1863, Letters Received, ser. 360, Colored Troops Division, RG 94 [B-41], in Berlin, Vol.2, p. 660.

so the government's proposition sounded good to them.²⁹

As a result of this enthusiastic recruitment, most of the new regiments joining the U.S. Army in 1863 were colored, a large portion of which were newly-freed slaves in the South.³⁰ These regiments in turn were strong recruiters of more soldiers--taking part in liberating former slaves and persuading them to join their forces. The 5th Regiment of the U.S. Colored Troops (made up of northern blacks) fought in Norfolk, Va. near the swamp and one soldier wrote home that "thousands of slaves belonging to rebel masters were liberated." This was one of many inland raids it made to recruit soldiers.³¹ Wild's African Brigade broke three blacks out of a prison in Newbern, NC so they could join them.³² In New Orleans a Negro lieutenant wrote home with pride about how two slaves, just arrived a few years before from Africa, had, upon the capture of the city, put down their farm tools and requested in their broken English to fight with the U.S. troops.³³

IV

A few voices of opposition were still heard even after the government had so clearly

²⁹Brig.Genl. J.T. Boyle to Hon. E.M. Stanton, 16 Dec. 1863, B-1777 1863, Letters Received, RG 107 [L-317], in Berlin, Vol.2, p. 663.

³⁰Cornish, p. 133.

³¹Milton M. Holland, Orderly Sergeant, Co. C., 5th USCI, Norfolk, Virginia, January 19, 1864, in Redkey, Edwin. *A Grand Army of Black Men*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.94.

³²Joseph E. Williams, Wild's African Brigade, New Bern, North Carolina, July 11, 1863; (R, July 18, 1863), in Redkey, p.92.

³³Robert H. Isabelle, Lieutenant, 2nd Louisiana Native Guards [74th SCI], New Orleans, Louisiana, February 27, 1863, in Redkey, p. 140.

reversed its stance. General Butler, commanding general in Louisiana, had long disagreed with General Phelps (of New Orleans) over the use of blacks in the military, believing their "natural fear of firearms" would render them ineffective. He even refused to allow the mulatto officers of the former Confederate Native Guard to join the U.S. Army, although their "intelligence, urbanity, and sincerity" were unarguable. Instead, they would be confined to duty as military laborers only.³⁴ Likewise, General Sherman went on record with a northern recruiter in 1864 proclaiming favor toward the Negro, but hesitancy toward their role as soldiers. Mostly he felt recruiting soldiers at all was demeaning to the profession and to the brave and talented men already in arms. He thought "the Negro is in a transition state and is not the equal of the white man." Negroes had been liberated by war and thus owed their services to the Army--though not as soldiers. Their services were needed as "pioneers, teamsters, cooks, and servants."³⁵

V

The difficulties in recruiting blacks, especially as the war dragged on, were twofold. First, it became obvious that the blacks who enlisted were going to be used mainly as laborers and not fighting soldiers. Second, they were not going to be paid as much as whites--when they were paid.

In Nashville, Major Stearns was in charge of raising the Negro troops. He took it upon himself to make sure that they got to be soldiers, not just laborers. He disagreed with

³⁴Berlin, Vol.1, p.42, 43.

³⁵Major General W.T. Sherman to John a. Spooner, 30 July 1864, enclosed in R.D. Mussey to Major {Charles W. Foster?} 2 Aug 1864, M-583 1864, Letters Received, ser.360 Colored Troops Division, RG 94 {B-465}, in Berlin, Vol.1, pp. 110,111.

wholesale impressment and called all the free Negroes in the community to a meeting to warn them that they had better volunteer for the army or they might be forced to be merely laborers.³⁶ Even those who began as cooks or personal servants put on uniforms as soon as possible.³⁷

General Butler (who moved north from Louisiana to Virginia in 1863) ordered the armies in Virginia and North Carolina to muster in as many negroes as possible into their ranks. All men between the ages of 18 and 45 were to be enlisted--none were to be hired as laborers if they could pass the Surgeon's examination.³⁸ The Commissioner for the Organization of Black Troops in Nashville, Tennessee, testified before the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission (AFIC) that the blacks in his area wanted to be soldiers. In fact, two-thirds of them would prefer that to be being laborers.

Equality of pay and benefits was an intricate part of the recruitment of the negroes. The promise of pay and complete protection from pursuing masters induced floods of fugitive slaves to run away and try to cross Union lines.³⁹ Butler's orders to the armies in Virginia and North Carolina included commands that they be paid the same as whites and provisions made for their families. Brigadier General Saxton, although the first to be authorized by the War Department to recruit blacks, had difficulty enlisting enough to form a colored regiment because many were already at work in other capacities as servants and sailors. They were paid

³⁶Williams, p.122.

³⁷Glaather, Joseph T. *Forged in Battle*. (London: Collier MacMillan, 1990), p. 62.

³⁸General Orders, No. 46, Head Quarters Department of Va. and North Carolina, 5 Dec. 1863, vol. 52 VaNc, General Orders Issued, ser. 5078, Dept. of Va. and NC & 18th Army Corps, RG 393. Pt. 1 [C-3062], in Berlin, Vol. 2, pp. 168-174.

³⁹Glaather, p. 61.

regularly for these services while those he succeeded in enlisting were discharged after several months because of lack of pay. He believed that this failure had weakened their confidence towards the Northerners and he requested money from the Secretary of War to entice them back.⁴⁰

This same sad situation was reflected by Colonel Chipman in Fort Scott, Kansas. After reviewing a black regiment, Chipman expressed deep satisfaction at their performance--but regret at their situation. Although they'd been told upon enlistment that they would be used as fighting soldiers and not laborers, "they [were] now two months in camp and no one [could] tell what [was] to be done with them."⁴¹ Complaints such as the above were common and urgent enough that the commanding headquarters in Virginia set up an investigating committee. Although the committee began its investigation with the assumption that the military's necessity knew no law, it found that its abuses had no justification. It suggested that negroes should be paid enough to provide for their families. The commission noted that a "considerable" number had taken off into the navy because they had more control over their remuneration.⁴²

VI

A side effect of the liberation of the slaves also plagued the military--the contraband

⁴⁰Brig. Genl. R. Saxton to Hon. Edwin M. Stanton, 29 Oct. 1862, S-2104, 1862 Letters Received, ser. 12, RG 94 {K-568}, in Berlin, Vol.1, p. 54.

⁴¹Excerpt from Coln. N.P. Chipman to General Samuel R. Curtis, 16 Oct. 1862, C-46 1862, Letters Received, ser. 2593, Dept. of the MD, RG 393 Pt.1 {C-104}, in Berlin, Vol.1, pp. 71,72.

⁴²General Orders 5 and 6 from Headquarters, Dept. of Va., 30 Jan, 1862 and 4 Feb. 1862, in Berlin, Vol. 2, pp. 114-118.

noncombatants that were displaced after their masters fled the oncoming army. These women, children, and aged either had nowhere to go or wanted to be with their loved ones who had been impressed by the military.

General Lorenzo Thomas set the tone for a common military practice when he provided for the families of the men he recruited in Louisiana.⁴³ This became necessary in Virginia as well. Major General John Pix reported in late 1862 that there were 3100 contraband, 1300 of whom lived in tents, outside Fort Monroe. They were dying from disease and malnutrition, and he requested that they be sent north to be cared for by the state of Massachusetts. So bad were the conditions that many wanted to be sent back to their old masters, a request often granted. He didn't feel they would desire this if the conditions hadn't been so bad. He didn't want to arm them because they were "universal" in their desire to work, but not fight.⁴⁴

In November 1863, General Dodge got permission to recruit an army of colored soldiers. Many didn't want to join, but they were all impressed nonetheless. (Usually there was no fuss in the impressment process; martial law prevailed--the soldiers had the guns and the blacks were used to obeying the whites anyway.) Their families would want to join them and so ran away from their masters and soon there were thousands of contrabands around the camps. Because this was resulting in disaster and diseases, contraband camps were commonly

⁴³Williams, p. 110.

⁴⁴Maj. Genl. John A. Dix to His Excellency John A. Andrew, 5 November 1862, Vol. - /3 VaNc, pp. 407-411, Letters Sent, ser. 5046, Dept of Va & 7th Army Corps, RG 393 Pt.1 [C-3203], in Berlin, Vol.2, pp. 131-134.

set up to feed and house the contrabands.⁴⁵ In most cases they were given some work to do, in others their supplies were benefits of having a husband or father in the military. The Quartermaster General advised the Chief Quartermaster in North Carolina that work shouldn't be made up just for the contraband to do, but in order to prevent starvation rations might need to be given out. For any necessary work, however, whites or blacks could be hired.⁴⁶

VII

As a result of the need to employ and house and care for the contrabands, many commanders confiscated the lands of rebellious southerners and put the freedmen to work on plots of land. In some cases, these plantations became small social experiments and the negroes set up schools and churches and were taught how to be self-sufficient. In Tennessee, an order was given for the confiscation of rebel plantations. Houses were to be built on them for the displaced negroes. All who were incapable of bearing arms would work on them and the rest were to be pressed into military service.⁴⁷ As early as 1862, requests were being made to allow the contrabands to take what was left of Rebel lumber, gardening tools, animals, and carts, and to care for themselves on land provided by the government.⁴⁸ This request was

⁴⁵1st Lieutenant James B. Nesbitt to Maj. Fisk, 16 Dec. 1865, N-33 1865, Registered Letters Received, ser. 3379, TN Asst. Comr., RG 105 [A-6183], in Berlin, Vol.2, pp. 474-477.

⁴⁶M.C. Meigs to Captain Herman Biggs, 6 May 1862, Vol. 59 pp. 478-79, Letters Sent, ser.9, Central Records, RG 92 [Y-154], in Berlin, Vol. 2, p. 122.

⁴⁷Orders No. 2,4 Feb 1864, Records of Capt. R.D. Mussey & of Maj. George L. Stearns, ser. 1149, Organization of USCT, Dept. of the Cumberland, RG 393 Pt. 1 [C-32], in Berlin, Vol.2, pp. 440, 441.

⁴⁸C.B. Wilder to Maj. Gen. Wool, 15 Apr. 1862, W-98 1862, Letters Received, ser. 5063, Dept. of Va & 7th Army Corps, RG 393 Pt. 1 [C-3199], in Berlin, Vol.2, pp. 120,121.

granted by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton who stated that "all vacant lands and plantations" inside the command area were to be divided up among the contraband.⁴⁹ In any case, there was a great deal of administration involved running these camps, and the military used them as a ready source of labor.

Those who administered these camps usually developed respect for the slaves and a desire to keep the promises made to them. These commanders were also the only defenders of any and all injustices towards the former slaves. When ordered by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton in August 1862 to remove all soldiers from the islands near Hilton Head, SC, David Hunter objected. The major-general insisted that to leave the cultivated land and break the promises of protection made to the negroes working on the various islands wouldn't be worth the few soldiers added to General George McClellan's army. Hunter's subordinate, R. Saxton, requested a few days after this exchange that he be allowed to arm 5000 of the negroes so that they could protect their own men. Many of the blacks on these islands had run away from their masters and were now employed cultivating the land. They were self-sufficient and needed only protection from vengeful former masters. Since the army was pulling out their small protectionary force, Saxton asked that some of the blacks be mustered into the army proper and armed so they could protect the islands on their own. The request was granted.⁵⁰

Dr. Orlando Brown, a physician involved in these early social experiments, testified before the AFIC that the contrabands in Norfolk, Virginia, had been placed on plantations to

⁴⁹Order, 28 Jan. 1863, Vol. 1 p. 149, Orders relating to volunteers, RG 107 [L-318], in Berlin, Vol.2, p.140.

⁵⁰OR, ser. 1, vol. 14, pp. 374-378.

work and were doing well. But he highly recommended that they be allowed to receive immediate pay for their labors. He also complained that they were being charged twice as much as whites for supplies. General Pix had taken over as many of the lands of the absentee rebels as possible, and the free negroes were operating cotton and tobacco farms as well as grist and saw mills.⁵¹ In Tennessee, General Dodge reported that many former masters requested the freedmen to come back and work for wages—but the freedmen would only work for a share of the crop. They were clearly becoming more selective and self-sufficient.⁵²

In North Carolina, the superintendent of the poor wrote glowingly of the labor of the contrabands. He felt that they more than earned their keep. The men went on foraging expeditions and brought back more than enough booty to repay the government for their care. In fact, poor whites requested sixteen times as much help as the blacks.⁵³

VIII

In spite of the valuable assistance offered by the freedmen and their demonstrated self-sufficiency, they continued to be underpaid or unpaid for their labor—whether it was merely manual work as soldiers. Because of this, the blacks grew more and more reluctant to join the forces. They were also experiencing unprecedented opportunities to earn money and work their

⁵¹Testimony of Dr. [Orlando] Brown before the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, [10 May 1863], filed with O-328 1863, Letters Received, ser. 12, RG 94 [K-68], in Berlin, Vol.2, pp.147-149.

⁵²1st Lieut. James B. Nesbitt to Maj. Fisk, 16 Dec. 1865, N-33 1865, Registered Letters Received, ser. 3379, In Asst. Comr., RG 105 [A-6183], in Berlin, Vol.2, pp. 474-477.

⁵³Excerpts from Vincent Colyer to Hon. Rob. Dale Owen, 25 May 1863, filed with O-328 1863, Letters Received, ser. 12, Rg 94 [K-84], in Berlin, Vol.2, pp.122-126.

own land and this often proved more enticing than inglorious military service. Some recruiters found their task difficult because the newly-freed slaves wanted to establish their own homes and solidify their families.⁵⁴ A black minister in Missouri told the AFIC that he had hired out his own time and purchased the freedom of his wife and 14 children as well as his own. He said that in St. Louis "the colored people generally are not so much in favor of enlisting . . . The free people who have bought themselves, are not much inclined to it, but the others are in favor of it."⁵⁵

There was much consternation on the part of the whites who were attempting to set up experiments on the former plantations to educate the blacks as well as employ them profitably. A northern teacher reported that on the converted plantations in Norfolk the blacks were spending a few hours each day in school. The situation was going so well there and the blacks were enjoying their employment and learning so much that when General Andrews came to recruit for the military service they all tried to stay out of sight. Dr. Brown had asked them if they'd like to become soldiers and one said "Give me an axe and I think I shall make the best soldier then."⁵⁶

At first the Treasury Department served as the blacks' only advocate against forced

⁵⁴Glaather, p. 61.

⁵⁵Testimony of Rev. Edward L. Woodson before the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, 1 Dec. 1863, filed with O-328 1863, Letters Received, ser.12 RG-94 [K-207], in Berlin, Vol. 2, p. 590.

⁵⁶Testimony of Miss Lucy Chase before the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, 10 May [1863], filed with O-328 1863, Letters Received, ser.12, RG 94 [K-68], in Berlin, Vol.2, pp. 150-154.

conscription.⁵⁷ Edward Pierce, special agent of the Treasury Department in Hilton Head, SC, complained to the Department of the South regarding the order to conscript all black men, ages 18–45 for the army. He had been in charge of an effort to grow crops on the former plantations in Hilton Head and believed that the recent order conflicted with the stated goals of the Treasury Department. A social experiment was going on—the blacks were learning how to work for wages, take pride in their work, and go to school. Not only would this experiment be interrupted, but a loss of time and money would occur if the workers were pulled out during the crucial cultivation stage. He also argued that blacks should not have to fight for a country they don't love and that they were all terrified of being shipped to Cuba once the army impressed them.⁵⁸ This fear may have explained why the workers on a plantation on St. Helena Island, SC, disappeared when they heard that an order had come in to move the male workers to a military camp. The men had to be forcibly dragged from the woods and their cabins, and (according to the superintendent of the plantation) demonstrated sadness when informed that they were going to serve in the army. He wrote to Pierce that "this 'conscription' together with the manner of its execution has created a suspicion that the government have [sic] not the interest in the negroes that it has professed, and many of them sighed . . . for the 'old fetters.'"⁵⁹

⁵⁷Berlin, Vol.1, pp. 37–41.

⁵⁸Edward L. Pierce to Maj. Gen. Hunter, 11 May 1862, enclosed in S.P. Chase to Edwin M. Stanton, 21 May 1862, Departments 454 1862, Letters received from the President and Executive Departments, RG 107 [L-306], Vol.1, pp. 46–48.

⁵⁹G.M. Wells to E.L. Pierce, [May 1862], enclosed in S.P. Chase to Edwin M. Stanton, 21 May 1862, Departments 454 1862, Letters received from the President & Executive Departments, RG 107 [L-306], in Berlin, Vol. 1, pp. 49, 50.

This type of abuse on the part of the government⁶⁰ led some to describe the labor of the negroes in the military as another form of slavery. They were dragged away from their farms, shops, and homes--even if they were exempt because of volunteering earlier. These abuses brought the "enlistments of colored men into disrepute," at least in the eyes of the blacks who had not yet joined the army.⁶¹ Captain Alfred Sears complained that, contrary to General Order No. 24, five of his black employees had been kidnapped and carried off to fight. The order had stated that no negroes in the employ of the Department of the South working on permanent fortifications could be drafted--and these men had been more than drafted. They had been carried off at bayonet point by Major Strong of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers with an armed guard and now the rest of the colored workers were frightened. Sears requested the immediate return of his men.⁶² One of the men who was kidnapped signed an affidavit attesting

⁶⁰Lewis C. Lockwood to Hon. Senator Wilson, Jan 29, 1862, L-130 1862, Letters received, RG 107 [L-9], in Berlin, Vol. 2, p. 113. Note: The Union officers didn't seem to be above fraud when recruiting. One slaveowner's testimony after the war was that his slaves had been impressed. The officer in charge had later said the negroes could go back to their master if they wanted to--if the slaveowner paid the officer \$100 for the work he'd put into their military training. The slaves demonstrated a desire to return, and so the owner paid out the money. But the next day the slaves went back to the officer--who said he couldn't return the money because--alas--it had been spent. This same officer was accused by others of having slaves steal from their masters when they were recruited. The tobacco or cotton they stole was sold and a profit made for the officer. (Excerpts from testimony of P.B. McGoodwin, 16 June 1865, Lt. J.S. Harkness, 20 June 1865, and William McGoodwin, 20 June 1865, proceedings of general court-martial in the case of Capt. Thomas H. Bunch, 5th USCC, MM-25-47, Court-Martial Case Files, ser. 15, RG 153 [H-13], in Berlin, Vol. 2, pp. 695-697.

⁶¹Capt. R. Delavan Mussey to My dear Reid, 19 Dec. 1863, M-190 1863, Letters Received, ser. 360, Colored Troops Division, Rg 94 [B-413], in Berlin, Vol. 2, pp. 423, 424.

⁶²Capt. Alfred F. Sears to Lt. Col. Chas. G. Halpine, 3 April 1863, enclosed in Col. Jos. R. Hawley to Lt. Col. Chas. G. Halpine, 29 Apr. 1863, H-1424 1863, Letters Received, ser. 4109, Dept. of the South, RG 393 Pt.1 {C-1317}, in Berlin, Vol. 1, pp. 55-57.

to his impressment. He was visiting in the home of a friend along with a few others when the major had marched them to away. When asked if he wanted to be a soldier, he said, no, not if he could choose--"told him if I wanted to be a soldier I had plenty of chances before." After being given a day to think it over, he was given a pass to go home.⁶³

Many blacks did prefer the quasi-slavery of wage labor for their former masters to becoming military laborers. The superintendent for the organization of black troops in Benton Banks, Missouri, wrote to his superior that no more could be recruited because their masters had convinced them to continue to work on the plantations during the summer. The fact that they had been terrorized by the stories of the Fort Pillow massacre, as well as lulled by offers of a part of the crop they raised had changed their disposition to enlist. Brigadier General William A. Pile said it was too late to recruit them and suggested they turn their attention elsewhere.⁶⁴

One can see the conflicting dynamics at work. The slaves were very glad to be rid of their masters and supported the north wholeheartedly at first, flocking to cross the Union military lines. The policy of the federal government at the beginning of the war was to honor the property laws and return the slaves to their southern masters. But as the military necessity was forced upon them, the administration and military brass changed their methods. Blacks began to be allowed into the military. But no sooner was this concession granted than the

⁶³Affidavit of Jacob Forrester, 28 Apr. 1863, enclosed on Col. Jos. R. Hawley to Lt. Col. Chas. G. Halpine, 29 Apr. 1863, H-1424, 1863, Letters Received, ser. 4109, Dept. of the South, RG 393 Pt. 1 {C-1317}, in Berlin, Vol. 1, pp. 57, 58.

⁶⁴Brig. Genl. Wm. A. Pile to Brig. Genl. L. Thomas 21 May 1864, P-163 1864, Letters Received, ser. 360, Colored Troops Division, RG 94 [B-53], in Berlin, Vol.2, pp. 6-7,608.

blacks began to show reluctance. For two reasons: They saw that they were exchanging one sort of slavery for another, and many had had a taste of what life could be like if they had their own farms and were earning their own money. The military was short on funds and glory and long on hard work and hardship—much the same as slavery had been.

The opposing issues can be seen: the need for soldiers vs. the need for military laborers; the mission of the social experiment plantations (rehearsal for the reconstruction) vs. the military necessity. Somewhere in the middle was the black man, wanting only to be the equal of his white brother, wanting only to be treated as a human being, wanting only to receive wages for his labor, wanting only to be treated fairly—to be free.

Bibliographic Information

The richest mine of information for the topic of the recruitment of slaves came from a series of books edited by Ira Berlin: *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861–1867*. He compiled letters, copies of military commands, court testimonies and other correspondence on the use of slaves by the Union army. *The Black Military Experience, Series I, Vol. III* (1982) was not as helpful as *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor, Series II, Vol. I* (1990). The former dealt mostly with the troops made up of northern blacks and my paper limited itself to former slaves.

Other primary sources that were helpful in learning about the general military experience, but not the particular issue of freedmen as soldiers were *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Thomas Higginson, 1869), *Black Phalanx* (Joseph Wilson, 1888), and *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army* (Dudley Cornish, 1861). These were often personal accounts of the war by black men who had been there. But they didn't deal with the use and recruitment of slaves so much.

George Williams offered a unique perspective. A pioneer black historian, he had actually been a colonel in the war. As such, his book, *A History of the Negro Troops* (1888), could be said to be a primary source. It certainly gave me some subjective and often controversial views on the administration and the military's policy on recruiting former slaves.

The War of the Rebellion: Official Records was certainly a rich mine of primary sources regarding the evolution of the military's attitudes toward the contrabands. But I found that there were few insights into the attitudes of the blacks themselves and that the most helpful

information had already been included by Berlin in a more efficient form.