

Freedmen/Contraband during the Civil War (1863-1865)

As Union armies marched through the south during the Civil War, thousands of enslaved people left the plantations and farms of their owners and sought protection from and jobs with Union forces. General Benjamin F. Butler in Virginia was the first to designate these people as “contraband of war” because they were formerly Confederate property and they had been used in the fight against the Union. They could, therefore, be seized by Union forces, thus becoming Union property; they were not officially emancipated.

But these people, seizing the opportunity to escape the oppression of chattel slavery, helped to shape the way that emancipation unfolded gradually throughout the course of the war. As Eric Foner describes in his 1990 book *A Short History of Reconstruction*, a first step toward emancipation was the article of war enacted by Congress in March 1862 that barred Union armies from returning escaped slaves to their former owners. Next, Washington, D.C. slaves were set free, and soon after that, enslaved people living in the territory occupied by the Union were freed, as well as those who were able to escape to Union-occupied territories. Finally, the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1863 freed some, but not all enslaved people—those living in the border states were excluded.

The 180,000 African Americans who served in the Union army were crucial to the emancipation process. Most of these soldiers had escaped from their masters and sought jobs in the army to support the Union and to help bring about emancipation. Military service launched many political careers among newly freed African American men, as Foner points out, including four United States Congressmen.

Military-aged black men were not the only people escaping from slavery during the Civil War. Women, children, and older men also fled, and the U.S. government and private agencies provided basic accommodation in camps throughout the south. Schools were set up in some of the camps, and many residents and leaders of these settlements advocated for self-governance and independence for the newly free African American communities. Conditions varied widely between camps, however, and disease spread quickly due to overcrowding, lack of proper sanitation, and other forms of government negligence. Additionally, the U.S. government paid well below market wage to African Americans doing government work, as observers such as James Yeatman pointed out.

Freedmen and women faced serious challenges after escaping from slavery during the Civil War, not the least of which were the racism and hostility of their “reluctant liberators,” as historian Vincent Harding called the Union army. Still, they were able to help shape what emancipation would look like for all African Americans at the end of the Civil War.

Document 1: Annual Report of the National Freedman's Relief Association

National Freedman's Relief Association of the District of Columbia. *First Annual Report* (Washington, D.C.: M'Gill & Witherow, 1863).
PHS Call number: PAM E 185.2 .N2 D3 1863

Source note: Abolitionists founded The National Freedman's Relief Association of the District of Columbia in March of 1862 in response to the increasing numbers of fugitive slaves coming into Washington, D.C. during the Civil War. The association was a private entity, operating independently from the government, and was concerned first and foremost with meeting the basic physical needs of thousands of people newly escaped from slavery. In addition to providing food, shelter, and clothing, the association also opened schools and provided religious and moral guidance. Among the officers of the Association were prominent members of the Republican government, including George E. Baker of the State Department and the Association's late president, Hannibal Hamlin (1809-1863), who had also worked for the Treasury Department.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the intended audience of this report?
2. What was the mission of the Freedman's Relief Association of the District of Columbia (page 1)?
3. What patterns do you notice in the list of people who donated money, clothing, or other goods to the Association (page 4)?
4. What were the estimates of the numbers of freedmen/contraband in Washington, D.C. and Alexandria (page 5)?
5. What conditions does the report describe in the freedmen camps (page 5)?
6. How has the Association addressed the need for education for the newly freed children and adults (page 6)?
7. What possible concern among white Americans does the report address on page 7 when it states that the freedmen are ready and willing to work, but still need financial support, clothing, and shelter as they transition from slavery to freedom?

Document 2: Report on the Condition of the Freedmen of the Mississippi

Yeatman, James E. *A Report on the Condition of the Freedmen of the Mississippi, Presented to the Western Sanitary Commission, December 17th, 1863* (St. Louis: Western Sanitary Com., 1864).

PHS Call number: PAM E 185.93 .M6 Y42 1864

Source note: James Erwin Yeatman (1818-1901) was a wealthy white industrialist and banker who was born in the south. Despite his family ties to slavery, he became a strong supporter of the Union in the Civil War. Yeatman helped found and was president of the Western Sanitary Commission (WSC), a private institution based out of St. Louis whose mission was to provide medical care and other services for wounded soldiers. The WSC had an abolitionist bent and, in addition to building and supplying hospitals, put resources towards supporting newly freed African Americans with donations of clothing and money and by helping to set up and staff schools.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? Who is the intended audience? Do you find this source to be reliable?
2. What education was offered to newly freed children and adults in Camp Holly Spring (page 2)? Based on the rest of the report, were schools common in freedmen's camps?
3. What injustices does Yeatman point out with regards to freedmen's labor (page 4-5)? What is Yeatman's attitude toward these injustices?
4. How does Yeatman describe the free black soldiers and their leaders (pages 5-6)?
5. As in Document 1, Yeatman comments on the freedmen's work ethic and eagerness to work hard on farms, as soldiers, and in other trades (page 10). Why do the authors of these two reports emphasize this point?
6. What conditions does Yeatman describe at Paw Paw Island, Young's Point, and Natchez (pages 11-13)? Are these conditions unique to these three camps?
7. Yeatman ends his report with a strongly worded criticism of the unfair pay and work requirements for freedmen, and argues, "these people should be educated up to, and made to realize, their new condition" (page 16). To what extent might African Americans of this time period agree or disagree with this statement?

Document 3: The African's Right to Citizenship

The African's Right to Citizenship (Philadelphia: James S. Claxton, 1865).
PHS Call number: PAM E 185.2 .A4 1865

**See especially pages 5-10 (page numbering starts on page 5).*

Source note: This short essay arguing for the right of African Americans to live in the United States and enjoy U.S. citizenship was published as a pamphlet in 1865. Relatively inexpensive and easy to print, pamphlets were commonly used in the 19th century to spread information about a political, religious, or social topic. James S. Claxton is listed as the printer of this pamphlet, but whether he or another author wrote it is not known. Claxton bought his publishing and photo album business from the two former owners in early 1865, the same year that he published *The African's Right to Citizenship*.

Reading questions:

1. Who published/printed this source? What is known about the author?
2. What is the writing style of the author? What assumptions can you make about the identity of the author, based on the text?
3. Before launching into the main argument that black people should be U.S. citizens, the author says he or she must first establish that African American people even have a right to remain in the country after emancipation (page 6). Based on what you know of this period, how common was the idea that African Americans shouldn't be allowed to live in the U.S. as free people?
4. What is the author's critique of the colonization movement, which proposed that free African Americans should be settled in colonies in West Africa and elsewhere (page 9)?
5. What comparison does the author make between African Americans and American Indians (pages 10-11)? What purpose does this comparison have in furthering his larger argument about African American citizenship rights?

Document 4: Out of the House of Bondage

Waterbury, Jared Bell. *Out of the House of Bondage: For the Freedmen* (New York: American Tract Society, [1864 or 1865]).
PHS Call number: PAM E 185.2 .W38 1864

Source note: Jared Bell Waterbury (1799-1876) was an ordained minister who served both Congregational and Presbyterian congregations throughout his life. Born in New York City, Waterbury attended Yale University and Princeton Theological Seminary, and lived and worked for most of his life in New York and New England.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this document, and who was the intended audience?
2. What is the tone of this document? How does its tone compare to that of Documents 2 and 3?
3. Waterbury compares modern U.S. slavery with the enslavement of the Israelites described in the Bible (page 4). Why does Waterbury make this comparison? How is his audience likely to respond to that comparison?
4. Waterbury assumes that some formerly enslaved people would rather return to slavery than face poverty and privation as free people (page 5). In Document 2 (page 5), Yeatman also argues that some formerly enslaved people might rather return to slavery than be treated as badly as they were by the government and the army near the end of the Civil War. How does this commonly held belief among white people at the time square with what you have learned about newly emancipated African Americans during and after the Civil War?
5. Where does Waterbury suggest that newly freed people settle and find work (pages 19-20)? What is his attitude towards colonization (page 20)? Would he agree with the author of Document 3 on the subject of colonization?
6. Waterbury offers lots of advice for newly freed African Americans, including his suggestion “to behave yourselves meekly under your new-found freedom, and to look to God in prayer for comfort, for help, and for guidance” (pages 20-21). What parallels can you draw between this advice and the Christianity of white southerners before the Civil War, or Christian-based resistance to the Civil Rights movement among northern and southern whites?

Document 5: Jourdan Anderson Letter Secondary Source

The “Jourdan Anderson Letter” (one-page document)

Source note: Jordan* Anderson (circa 1825-1907) was born into slavery in Tennessee and owned by a man about two years older than him, Colonel Patrick Henry Anderson (1823-1867). After gaining his freedom in 1864, Jordan Anderson moved to Ohio with his wife and at least three children. Nearly four months after the end of the Civil War, Anderson dictated a letter to his abolitionist employer, Valentine Winters. The letter was a response to Jordan Anderson’s former master, who had requested that Anderson and his family return to Tennessee to work on the plantation. In addition to sending this letter, Winters submitted it to the *Cincinnati Commercial*, a newspaper with a Republican, anti-slavery leaning. The published letter caused an immediate sensation, and then came back into the public’s attention in 2012, when the people and places mentioned in it were corroborated by the *Associated Press* and black history scholars.

*sometimes spelled “Jourdan”

Reading questions:

1. Who wrote this letter, and who is its intended audience? Is this a reliable source?
2. What is the tone of the letter?
3. Do you think this is a typical letter that an African American might write to a former master after the Civil War? Why or why not?
4. How did Anderson gain his freedom, according to his letter (page 1)?
5. What does Anderson request from his former master, in order to “forget and forgive old scores” (page 2)?
6. What does Anderson mean when he asks “if there would be any safety for my Milly and my Jane” (page 2)?
7. This letter is sometimes referred to as “satire” and compared to the writings of Mark Twain. What about the letter seems to fit with this categorization? What about it falls outside of that category, and why?

Document 6: Vincent Harding Secondary Source

Harding, Vincent, “Slavery Chains Done Broke at Last,” in *There Is a River* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1981).

Source note: Vincent Harding (1931-2014) was an African American historian, theologian, pastor, and social justice activist with close ties to Martin Luther King, Jr. In the early 1960s, Harding and his wife Rosemarie devoted themselves to the civil rights movement, advocating nonviolent resistance and protesting nuclear armament. Harding taught at Spelman College and other universities, landing at Iliff School of Theology in Denver in 1981 as a professor of religion and social transformation, and remaining there until his retirement in 2004.

Reading questions:

1. Who wrote this source? When was it written?
2. What did Emancipation Day celebrations entail in the years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed (page 259)?
3. According to Harding, why did freedom need to “become a full-blown institution” (page 260)?
4. Why did Harding choose to examine the January 12th, 1865 meeting between black church leaders and General Sherman in Savannah (pages 261-264)? How does this meeting advance Harding’s argument about African Americans shaping their future near the end of the Civil War?
5. To what common claim does Harding provide the powerful counterargument that the African American leaders who emerged after emancipation were definitively not “products of white paternalism, of an internalized white work ethic or a concentration camp system” (page 265)?
6. What was the purpose of Field Order 15 (pages 267-270)? Why was it “sheer altruism”? How did it affect the lives of African Americans?
7. Why did so many African Americans advocate for self-government in autonomous communities at the end and after the Civil War? What are some examples of these communities (pages 268-269)?
8. What is the main point that Harding makes in this chapter?