

FREEDOM WAS THEIR NORTH STAR: FORMERLY ENSLAVED WOMEN'S EFFORTS
TO SECURE AND DEFINE FREEDOM DURING THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

By

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To Dyese, Dara, Jasmine, Tanatswa, Adrianna, Tyesha,
and all our sisters who are healing with hope.

We belong to multitudes.

—

To Zachary James Wright

“We did it, Joe.”

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Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific and slaved woman, whose mind is active as your own, his range of feelings is as vast as your own; who prefers the way the light hits in one particular spot in the woods, Who enjoys fishing where the water eddies in the nearby stream, who loves her mother in her own complicated way, thinks her sister talks too loud, and has a favorite cousin, a favorite season, who excels at dressmaking and knows, inside herself, that she is as intelligent and capable as anyone. Slavery is the same woman born in a world that loudly proclaims its love of freedom and inscribes this love inessential texts, a world in which these same professors hold this woman as slave, hold her mother a slave, her father a slave, her daughter a slave, and when this woman peers back into the generations all she sees is the enslaved. She can hope for more. She can imagine some future for her grandchildren.

Ta-Nahesi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, (2015)

INTRODUCTION

“We Must Fight for Liberty!”

Peggy lay under the shade of the big magnolia tree, resting awhile on her way home from the missionary house. On the Sea Islands, she had made them her home, after fleeing from a plantation in Savannah, Georgia, one year ago. As she lay, she wondered whether her friends were still there. Were they alive? Had they been punished for her escape? Had they made it to some other Union occupied territory? Would she see them again? Last winter on the island, Peggy had slipped and had a fall from which she never recovered. Walking had become difficult, and every journey was exhausting. She rested, also hoping to shake the conversation she had just had with the missionary woman out of her head. She had asked, “Did you have a good master, Peggy?” The premise made Peggy shudder and she covered her face to keep herself from remembering him. “Oh! He was very bad,” Peggy exclaimed, “I cannot tell you all the cruel things he did to us. There is no ugly thing you ever heard of but what he would do.” Peggy watched the missionary try to imagine her experiences and knew she was incapable of understanding the horrors she had endured. But a smile crept over her face as she gazed at the sunset on the horizon and remembered what she said next: “But I thank God for all the good and the bad. I yet live and am free, and I thank God!”

Indeed, Peggy knew she was free, and she was determined to make sure it would be true in every part of her life. “Freedom was the North Star, towards which” she directed all her actions. She and the other freedwomen had a lot to do to make it so; build homes, care for their children and the sick, attend school, sew clothes, find and cook food. They still had so little time

for leisure. But the song they sang as they worked together, which became their very own battle cry, declared the reason they could not rest: “We must fight for liberty!” Peggy saw the missionaries’ confusion every time they heard the freedwomen sing their war song, “Your men are already fighting for your liberty! You are chattel no more,” one woman assured them, presuming they did not understand the nature of the war. Still, on they sang, “We must fight for liberty.”¹

* * *

Formerly enslaved women fought, throughout the Civil War, to secure and define their freedom. Through their determination to free themselves, their family and kin, formerly enslaved women played an integral part in the demise of the institution of slavery and laid the foundations of Black freedom in the South. By daily making claims to the freedom they wanted, formerly enslaved women played an active role in defining the meaning of Black freedom. Occupied in November 1861, the Sea Islands of South Carolina became one of many hubs for the building of Black freedom, providing the enslaved there with a “rehearsal for Reconstruction.”² The islands had had over ten thousand enslaved people residing on them when the Union won the region back from the Confederacy, and the number climbed quickly as those from neighboring towns and states heard of Union victory. Two years later, the Emancipation Proclamation and conscription led to Black men leaving the islands to join Union forces. It was after this that the

¹ This account is reconstructed from an excerpt featured in, Elizabeth Hyde Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1893), 152.

² “Rehearsal for reconstruction” is a term coined by Willie Lee Rose in her 1964 book wherein she examined the South Carolina Sea Islands Federal experiment in Black freedom, termed the Port Royal Experiment. Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

missionary, Elizabeth Hyde Botume, to whom Peggy had told tales of her former master, heard the women sing their freedom song: “We must fight for liberty.” Botume did not see the song as an opportunity to more deeply understand the “liberty” formerly enslaved women believed they were fighting for, concluding instead that Black men “understood what freedom meant for them much better than the women did.” From her perspective, Black men who strode bravely onto the battlefield, “comprehended that they had rights, and this alone would make heroes out of chattels.” But, she reported, the women sang of their fight for freedom, failing to understand that the “men had already fought for it.” Between Botume’s perception of the source of Black freedom and the women’s lyrical rallying cry, lay the unspoken yet vastly differing ideas of the definition of Black freedom, what it entailed, who, and what would define and secure it.³

The meaning of this misunderstood song of formerly enslaved women in the Union occupied South is the subject of this dissertation. Where definitions of “freedom” and “liberty,” for Botume and many of her white counterparts, center on the demise of the institution of slavery, Black women moved through the war with the belief that their freedom was not yet won and, more significantly, that they had an active part to play in the fight for it. While the Civil War put a crack in the edifice of slavery, enslaved women, through their freedom building efforts, placed enough pressure on the institution to shatter it completely. Black women did not stop there. Behind Union lines, and on the plantations of their enslavement, enslaved women formed battalions of their own and engaged in the fight to define and secure freedom.

This project explores the actions and experiences of enslaved women throughout the Civil War, to ascertain their constructed concepts of freedom. If “Freedom was the North Star” by which their every action was guided, those actions illuminate their ideas of freedom.

³ Botume, *First Days Among the Contraband*, 152.

Foundationally, it asks: What did “freedom” mean to Black women? More specifically, what rights did they seek to acquire? What facets of freedom did they deem significant? Did they define “liberty” and “freedom” beyond citizenship, legal personhood, and political inclusion? If so, how? Further, how did Black women take advantage of the political and social context of war and Union occupation to both challenge and leverage formal and informal systems of authority, as a means to engineer personal and collective freedom? How did newly freed women—as legally, socially, and politically disenfranchised people—contribute to the construction of freedom? Although Black women had long been excluded from the formal infrastructures within which they could challenge their subjugation, this project demonstrates that Black women saw and seized every opportunity that arose during the war to forge freedom and to give that status their own meaning. Black women sought the fullness of freedom, beyond the achievement of citizenship. They fought to preserve their families and protect their children; to express themselves freely before and outside of the white gaze. They claimed the rights to autonomy over their mobility, day-to-day governance of their lives, and their homes. Black women rejected a version of freedom in which they were subjects of racial condescension and white authority, even to white abolitionists who believed themselves to be allies of Black freedom.

Beyond the battlefield, the Civil War was marked by a myriad of rivalries over the definition of Black freedom in America. On the national stage, debates over the future of slavery had risen to yet another peak in the decade preceding the outbreak of war, becoming the centerpiece of the 1860 presidential election. While congressmen, abolitionists, pro-slavery apologists, and a handful of ex-enslaved men and women flooded popular discourse with their ideas regarding slavery and the nature of Black freedom, the enslaved people quietly made their ideas known by continuing to run away, or through prayers for slavery’s end within the safety of

the “invisible institution.” The secession of the Confederate states, and the subsequent outbreak of war, became the boiling point of these longstanding debates, which would rage on through the war and beyond.

Recasting the Civil War as a battle over the definition of Black freedom and what Blackness would mean in America, it is clear that multiple powers were attempting to pen that definition. The Union and Confederacy occupied the two major factions, but ideas within the Union were splintered into various conflicting groups. Pro-slavery Unionists opposed the war being turned into an abolitionist war; anti-slavery advocates were even more fragmented, divided between those who called for abolition on moral grounds, versus those who decried slavery’s expansion but did not call for its abolition; those who opposed the institution as economically unviable; and those who called for Black civil and political rights. Politically, even the Republicans were divided across a broad spectrum of radical to moderate abolitionism.⁴ Each of these groups’ voices were amplified and made their ideas regarding slavery and Black freedom known in Congress, on lecture circuits, and in pamphlets, and newspapers. However, the ideas of those whom the debates were about, the enslaved, were not consulted or considered in these national debates. Thus, others sought to define Black freedom without the input of the enslaved themselves.

⁴ To further explore the pre-war and wartime debate over slavery on the national stage, consult Jennifer L. Webber, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln’s Opponents in the North*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); James Oakes, *The Radical Republican: Frederic Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007); Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2013); Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); R. J. M. Blackett, *The Captive’s Quest: Fugitive Slave Law and the Politics of Slavery*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Paul D. Escott, *The Worst Passions of Human Nature: White Supremacy in the Civil War North*, (Charlottesville: University Virginia Press, 2020).

Formerly enslaved women did not partake in these national debates, yet they strove to secure and define freedom for themselves. Behind Union lines, they contended with various groups that believed Black women should follow rather than lead. First were Union soldiers and officials, including superintendents to the freed people. Union occupation led to military rule over the inhabitants, both Black and white, and the nature of the “contraband camps” was fundamentally shaped by particular officers and their ideas about Black freedom. For example, Nashville, Tennessee was under Military Governor, Andrew Johnson, who did not permit the use of military time or resources to provide contraband peoples with shelter and food. However, General Rosecrans, who oversaw the city’s occupation, refused to expel enslaved people who arrived because he believed it was not the military’s job. He also came to rely on the extra laborers.⁵ As far as this dissertation is concerned, these were the supporting actors. Indeed, at its center lies the examination of formerly enslaved women’s ideas of Black freedom.

The military and the Federal Government’s responses to the efforts of the enslaved to create freedom proved key to creating the landscape. By May 1861, only a month after the war had commenced, hundreds of enslaved men and women had reached the Union Fort Monroe in Virginia. Under the longstanding Fugitive Slave Act, Union soldiers were obliged to take them back to their owners, but seeing the opportunity to utilize Black men’s labor, General Benjamin Butler passed the “contraband order,” which allowed enslaved people to remain behind Union lines under the protection of the army. This was not the only Union base that was buckling under the weight of countless arrivals of enslaved people, causing the Federal Government to pass the First Confiscation Act that summer, which legalized retaining slave property behind Union lines that had been employed in the Confederate war effort. A year later, the Second Confiscation Act

⁵ John Cimprich, *Slavery’s End in Tennessee, 1861-1865*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985), 37-38.

passed, going further than the first by declaring all enslaved people who reached Union lines free.⁶ The progression of these laws “depended upon the voluntary actions of fugitive slaves,” and created a legal infrastructure for their freedom-building efforts to take place behind Union lines.⁷

Another diverse but significant group were missionaries and aid agents deployed by Northern antislavery and Freedmen’s Aid societies. Freedmen’s aid societies existed in major cities like Philadelphia, New York, and regionally in New England, throughout the antebellum era. Split into innumerable factions, groups formed with specific ideas about how slavery should be ended, what the role of Black people in America would be, and what the enslaved people needed to be fit for the citizenry. Although countless organizations sponsored missionaries, teachers, and aid agents to the freedpeople throughout the war, this study mainly explores those from the American Missionary Association and Edward L. Pierce’s Gideonites.

The American Missionary Association (AMA) was founded as an ecumenical radical abolitionist organization in 1846 by Lewis Tappan and other abolitionists, who were dissatisfied with other abolitionist organizations like the American Home Mission Society (AHMS) and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), who accepted donations from slaveholders and did not assert a definitive abolitionist stance.⁸ It was the product of an organizational merger between the Union Missionary Society, which had predominantly Black members and was led by the minister and abolitionist James W. C. Pennington; the Amistad Committee, organized by Lewis Tappan, Joshua Leavitt, and Simeon Smith Jocelyn (to aid the Africans in the Amistad case); the Committee for West Indian Missions, established by five

⁶ Oakes, *Freedom National*, 140-143, 225-228.

⁷ *Ibid*, 143.

⁸ Joe M. Richards, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), vii.

Congregationalist ministers from Oberlin; and the Western Evangelical Missionary Society, established for work among the Native Americans.⁹ The AMA advocated “political activity, insisted upon the essentially antislavery nature of the Constitution, and was dedicated to purging churches of the stain of slavery.”¹⁰ Committed to radical abolition, the AMA deployed missionaries to Africa, and the nation, and supported American enslaved people who made it to Canada.

Throughout the Civil War, the AMA deployed missionaries to the South to work among the freedpeople, providing aid and opening schools. It established over five hundred schools in the South, including schools such as Fisk University, Tugaloo College and Atlanta University, spending more than any other organization- including the Freedmen’s Bureau- on teachers and the building of schools.¹¹ These were not traditional “New England school-marms.” One-third of their missionaries were men, many came from the Mid-west, and over four hundred were African American, almost two hundred of whom were women. The missionaries working with the AMA thus typically held abolitionist ideas but varied widely in their perceptions of Black Americans and the enslaved. Thus, these missionaries went South, each with their own ideas of what Black freedom should be, seeing themselves as stewards, to train and usher the formerly enslaved people into freedom.

The Gideonites were an even more eclectic group of antislavery activists.¹² Deployed to the South Carolina Sea Islands after responding to the call issued by Edward L. Pierce, the group

⁹ Clara Merrit Deboer, “The Role of Afro-Americans in the Origin and Work of the American Missionary Association,” Ph.D. Diss. Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1973, 11.

¹⁰ Richards, *Christian Reconstruction*, vii.

¹¹ Deboer, “The Role of African Americans,” iii.

¹² The name “Gideonites,” or “Gideon’s Band,” for the missionaries that mostly came from New England to the Sea Islands, came from Union soldiers. The term was initially derogatory, but came to be “synonymous with their goodwill efforts.” It references the Biblical army of Gideon that was notably smaller than their opposition, but ultimately victorious and led by God. Michael Coker, “The Port Royal Experiment,” in Leslie M. Alexander, Walter C. Rucker (eds), *Encyclopedia of African American History, Vol. 1*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO: 2010), 504.

of 53 missionaries, most from Boston, included Laura M. Towne and her counterpart Ellen Murray, both of whom founded the Penn School on St. Helena Island. Others like Elizabeth Hyde Botume and Charlotte Forten traveled as missionaries to the Sea Islands and the latter taught at the Penn School with Towne and Murray. Pierce's goal in creating the Port Royal Experiment was to prove that formerly enslaved people were suitable for wage labor. The missionaries, however, differed over what the mission should be. Further, as C. Van Woodward argues, the Sea Islands became a battleground upon which "the abolitionists and the slaves confronted each other on slave territory for the first time."¹³ This conflict is one of the focal points of this project, as it brings into focus the ideas formerly enslaved women had of freedom, and the powers they contended with to make it a reality.

C. Van Woodward highlights the questions that marked the conversation about Black freedom: "whether [the enslaved] was to be entirely free at all, and if free, whether... to be a serf, a wage laborer, a landowner, a citizen, a soldier, a voter, an officeholder. What were [their] capacities? What were [their] rights? If slavery had indeed done the damage the abolitionist claimed, was the slave capable of the equality they promised?"¹⁴ All of these were questions about the definition of Black freedom, and they drove missionaries' interactions with and evaluations of the newly freed people. Guided by notions of gender, race, and ideals of citizenship, the AMA "Monthly Report" card for the schools, asked: "Do the mulattoes show any more capacity than the blacks?"¹⁵ Missionaries, both Black and white, saw themselves as testing

¹³ C. Van Woodward, "Introduction," in Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, xi.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, xiii.

¹⁵ Monthly report sheets were filled out by teachers, and sent to the AMA headquarters, answering a series of questions about their classes including several male and female attendees, how many were learning to sew, and what subjects were taught. The forms were filled out and often came with additional notes from teachers about the progress of their class or particular needs. Mary M. Reed, "Monthly Report of School No.4," in AMA Archives, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana (hereafter AMAA).

and proving the fitness of the formerly enslaved for citizenship. However, these questions, while valid, were questions asked of the freed people, not by the freed people.

Thus, while their presence is important, missionaries, superintendents, and other Union officials are secondary characters in this narrative.¹⁶ This is the reason why white actors are only named on occasions where their biography is important to understanding the explored interaction. Naming white actors in a project where most of the protagonists are unnamed disrupts the narrative and forces our attention away from those who are the intended subject. This is also the reason that each vignette expands the stories Black women told, from their vantage point, with imagined names. Doing so allows for every theme explored to be understood as personal experiences that were part of the life stories of the people explored. To do this, names from military contraband rosters and other moments in missionary diaries where they name Black women, have been used, to point to those who were there and what their stories might have been.

Newly freedwomen had ideas of their own about what their freedom should be and fought to make them a reality throughout the war. Using the range of former enslaved women's interactions with Union soldiers and officials, missionaries (including teachers, nurses, and aid agents), and, on occasion, their former owners, this project examines their ideas of freedom, and their efforts to secure it. Looking at Union occupation from their vantage point, it is clear that Black women struggled with missionaries and Union powers behind Union lines every day to take the reins on defining their own freedom. Their day-to-day negotiations with these actors over food, clothing supplies, labor, parenting, housing, and education presented Black women

¹⁶ The term "missionaries" will be used throughout to refer to any person from the North working in the South under the auspices of an aid agency. This includes teachers, nurses, and aid workers that were not working under the Freedmen's Bureau or in any affiliation to the Union.

with opportunities to make freedom in their own image rather than that of those who came to help them. Where they failed to acquire certain freedoms, particularly visible in many Black women's experiences in the sex trade and of limited sexual agency, their efforts and experiences further illuminate the behemoth that stood behind the beast of slavery: deeply entrenched racial hierarchy. As formerly enslaved people, emerging as a free but lower labor class, poverty and a lack of economic opportunities would fundamentally shape their wartime and post-war freedom. However, ideas of race proved to shape even the opportunities they had and thus played a key role in placing limitations on their free lives, despite their shifting legal status.

Throughout this examination of formerly enslaved women behind Union lines, the Civil War is considered as a backdrop and center stage of the narrative. This is because the progress of the war had an impact on Black women's freedom pursuits, by bringing free soil into the South. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, local military personnel frequently created the conditions and obstacles Black women met behind Union lines. However, in an effort to look at Black women's freedom building efforts from their vantage point, beyond occupation and military orders that could demand their removal or other shifts that directly affected them, formerly enslaved women, unaware of how military policies would unfold, acted according to what they thought would help them achieve their desired freedom rather than what the Union permitted.

Thus, the contraband camps in Union occupied territories serve as a crucible of this analysis. In these spaces of containment, overseen by white Union officials, Northern missionaries and aid agents, formerly enslaved black men and women began to build freedom for themselves. Black women appropriated Union lines and contraband camps, turning them from simple containment into free soil upon which their ideas of freedom could become a reality. While these white, and some Black, northern authorities understood themselves to be imbued

with righteousness, power, and influence to define and shape black freedom, the newly freed did not always agree. As Stephen Hahn argues, the newly freed people “were hardly passive recipients of the lessons, doctrines, and discourses fashioned by northerners.” They did not “conform to the image that the antislavery movement suggested,” and, instead, wielded their own “complex notions of liberty.”¹⁷

Black women are the focus of the analysis of formerly enslaved people’s “complex notions of freedom,” for several reasons. First, because enslaved women did not partake in the national debates over Black freedom, nor could they directly contribute to the military effort like 179,000 Black men did, they are often left out of historiographical consideration of Civil War freedom building. Second, particularly after the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation led to the enlistment of formerly enslaved men into the Union army, contraband camps were occupied predominantly by Black women. This made contraband camps gendered space in which the typically obfuscated lives of Black women become increasingly visible in the archival record. It was in those camps that Black women crafted free homes, communities, and relationships with white authorities that secured freedom for themselves and their kin.

Exploring Black freedom as an idea often leads us to the historiographical methodologies of intellectual, political, and legal history. The work of James Oakes, in *Freedom National*, serves as an example of this, telling the story of slavery’s end with a focus on antislavery movements and the efforts of the Republican party to end slavery. While Oakes argues policymakers’ reliance on the “loyalty” of the enslaved to the Union and freedom to achieve slavery’s end, the enslaved are not the center of his story.¹⁸ Approaches like Oakes’ rely upon the

¹⁷ Stephen Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles In the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 75.

¹⁸ James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), xiv, xvii. Other literatures that highlight the political antislavery and abolitionist impact on slavery’s

legislative changes, political rhetoric, performatively written and spoken word of prominent figures, such as abolitionists orators, pro or antislavery-public officials, and newspapers that illuminate mainstream public opinion. What is more, these perspectives are mostly drawn from the Northern, white and middle-class demographics or Northern black activists, thus yielding a construction of freedom that is not reflective of the formerly enslaved themselves. These sources and methods of analysis render both the ideations and decisive actions of formerly enslaved Black men and women, particularly women, notably silent and mostly irrelevant to the defining or securing of Black freedom.

Thus, Black women have not traditionally been centered in the historiography of the Civil War, nor have they been seriously considered as engineers of Black freedom during the war. While recent works centering on the realities of contraband camps during the Civil War have allowed for the stories of Black women's experiences behind Union lines to be recovered, these recent works overwhelmingly outline and examine the constructs of contraband camps, Union efficacy, and intentions for Black freedom. Here, the experiences of Black women serve as examples of the ideas and actions of the Union, thus featuring Black women while rendering them relatively passive recipients of freedom rather than makers of it.

The recent work of Chandra Manning, Amy Murrell-Taylor, and Stephanie McCurry more closely considers the experiences and perspectives of formerly enslaved women in the building of freedom. Manning traces the unfolding contraband camps throughout the South, arguing that enslaved people sought "citizenship" as a means to the end of achieving "autonomy

end and the making and defining of freedom include, James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007); Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Stanley Harold, *American Abolitionism Its Direct Political Impact from Colonial Times into Reconstruction*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

for themselves, their loved ones, and their community.” Defining wartime “citizenship” as “direct access to the power of national government,” through the establishment of connections to and relationships with the Union, Manning argues that this access “could help the freedpeople do or achieve the things that mattered most to them.” Deeming these relationships as central to enslaved people attaining “their versions of what freedom should be and mean,” Manning’s work, thus, centers on the efforts of the enslaved to make themselves indispensable to the Union, rather than on their attempts to directly claim and assert the freedom they desired.¹⁹

Murrell-Taylor’s *Embattled Freedom* is, similarly, an extensive examination of the experiences of formerly enslaved people behind Union lines throughout the war. She argues that enslaved people “knew that if freedom was to come during the Civil War, it was not going to come directly to them,” but had to be “searched for and found.” Their intent to “find” freedom required the enslaved to “leave the plantations of their enslavement” for Union lines, a move that pushed them deeper into war zones and “the most contested spaces” of the war. Further, Murrell-Taylor argues that those who fled to Union lines, “experienced emancipation in slow motion,” describing the war years as a “transition” from bondage to freedom.²⁰ Constructing the wartime experiences of enslaved people as mere experiences of “transition” does not allow for their active participation in defining what their freedom was, nor in securing it past running to Union lines.²¹

McCurry’s recent work *Women’s War* argues that while Black men’s military service has occupied the majority of historiographical considerations of the building of freedom, formerly enslaved women also “faced a battle for survival and liberation,” one that was as dangerous and

¹⁹ Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 14-15.

²⁰ Amy Murrell-Taylor, *Embattled Freedom: Journeys Through the Civil War’s Slave Refugee Camps*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2018), 2, 7, 8, 9.

²¹ The work of Leslie Schwalm is also a notable work in which formerly enslaved women’s experiences of the Civil War are considered as the center of the Civil War narrative. Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

momentous. She highlights the gendered intentions of the Union's gradual emancipation policies, which were "aimed only at enslaved men." The Union recognized the "military value" of enslaved men reaching Union lines, thus created policies to justify retaining them, whereas women merely posed a problem to the Union. This reality is a significant framing idea throughout this project, as it is necessary to understanding the unique vulnerability of Black women behind Union lines and the significance of what they successfully secured for themselves. However, McCurry explores the consequences of this reality in the Union's dependence upon marriage for the governance of freedwomen. Where Ira Berlin argues that the enslaved "became prime movers in securing their own freedom," McCurry's work offers the qualifier that the reality was fundamentally gendered, with the Union's policy of marriage playing a key role in Black women's freedom.²²

This project builds on this recent historiography by centering on contraband camps and considering the experience of the enslaved. However, it goes further than these by considering formerly enslaved women not just as those experiencing the "transition" of slavery to freedom, nor as individuals whose movements and actions were entirely dictated by the Union. Instead, this project argues that formerly enslaved women had their own ideas about freedom which they sought to make a reality. Inspired by Thavolia Glymph's argument that "enslaved women acted on the belief that the war was about slavery," knowing that "their freedom lay in the balance," this study considers their actions from decisions to leave the plantation, to their assertions of their own ideas, which many times contradicted missionaries and Union officers. Glymph highlights the importance of enslaved women's lived experiences under slavery to their wartime

²² Stephanie McCurry, *Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the American Civil War*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), 3,2,7, 65-68; Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Steven F. Miller, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5-6.

antislavery and freedom building efforts. Not only did their memories of “past struggles and the physical and psychological violence they endured” drive their decision-making, they “carved out new arenas of struggle and spaces for themselves” behind Union lines, to build “the new world of freedom, for which they risked their lives.” In Glymph’s estimation, the commitment of formerly enslaved women to cling to the “ties of kin and community,” propelled the “nation towards emancipation and an entirely new world of freedom.”²³

The defining and securing of this “entirely new world of freedom,” is the topic of this dissertation. Aiming to broaden our definitions of freedom from employment, property ownership, and the accumulation of wealth (all of which Marissa J. Fuentes highlights as capitalistic definitions of freedom), this project looks for the holistic facets of freedom that enslaved women demonstrated as valuable.²⁴ Informed by the rich historiography of antebellum enslaved black cultures that foreground slave resistance as claims to holistic and affective freedoms, this study assumes the continuance of their antebellum cultures, priorities, ways of constructing their identities. As Stephen Hahn argues, the “contrabands-turned-freedpeople” arrived at Union lines with “different accumulations of belongings, resources, and sensibilities,” highlighting their “well developed ideas of what free labor should mean.”²⁵ Not only did they have “well developed ideas” about labor, but this project demonstrates that Black women had well developed ideas of what freedom meant for their children, their homes, relationships with white women, kinship ties, and sexual agency all of which they asserted (both successfully and unsuccessfully) within contraband camps.

²³ Thavolia Glymph, *The Women’s Fight: The Civil War’s Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2018), 2, 93, 95, 222, 227, 250.

²⁴ Marissa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 51.

²⁵ Stephen Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 75, 77.

The timing and topography of Union occupied locations fundamentally shaped the contraband camps that emerged. Camps located in eastern North Carolina, the South Carolina Sea Islands (also known as the Port Royal Experiment), Fort Monroe, Norfolk, Craney Island, and Poplar Springs Virginia, Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee, are the specific locations of this study. These places have been chosen because, all were occupied within the first eighteen months of the war, and served as locations to which enslaved people fled. Chandra Manning highlights the transient nature of many contraband camps, as it was common for enslaved women and men to move with the armies as they battled through the South.²⁶ However, each of these cities and islands had camps for the duration of the war.²⁷ Fort Monroe in Hampton Roads, Virginia is unique among the locations because it was never in the hands of the Confederacy. The Fort served as the only Union post in Confederacy after war broke out, and the first place to which enslaved people ran.

Norfolk, Newbern, Memphis, and Nashville were all cities the Union occupied in early 1862. This meant that the enslaved women, men, and children who fled to these locations entered bustling cities, where camps were established on their outskirts, and in repurposed abandoned buildings in the city. Each of these cities presented those in pursuit of freedom with unique challenges. First, they presented formerly enslaved people with an opportunity for anonymity and increased military protection. In crowded cities, it was harder for masters and mistresses to retrieve them because the military presence was much denser in cities than in rural locations. While cities exposed Black women and men to violence, they were assured a modicum of protection from their Confederate masters and mistresses. New Bern, North Carolina struggled

²⁶ Manning, *Troubled Refuge*, 13-149.

²⁷ It is important to note that the Union frequently moved contraband peoples from camp to camp, depending upon the Confederate threat and also what was most efficient for the Union army. This is discussed in the dissertation. Amy Murrell-Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 80-84.

with repeated outbreaks of smallpox, which frequently shut down the missionary schools and repeatedly led to the destruction of clothing, bedding, and other supplies which had to be burned. Nashville, Norfolk, and Memphis experienced chronic overcrowding and insufficient shelter for those who reached Union lines there. In Nashville, missionaries reported that people resided in tents under the blazing sun as there were so few trees to provide shade in the city. Others reported rent extortion that took all their wages every week. These places challenged their plans and hopes for freedom.²⁸

Craney Island and the Sea Islands were significantly different. Their unique features shaped the nature of freedom building. Craney Island was a small island on the coast of Norfolk, Virginia. The island was a one-quarter mile wide and three-quarters of a mile long and described by missionaries and former slaves alike as “desolate” and agriculturally barren land. The size of the island meant that the 1000 Black (mostly) women, who were removed from mainland Virginia to the island in 1862, struggled to find shelter. There was shelter enough for only half of the contraband. Simultaneously, the desolation of the land meant that the contraband (and missionaries) could not be employed in agricultural labor to earn money, nor could they produce edible crops to feed themselves, making them entirely dependent upon the Union army for food and supplies.²⁹

The Sea Islands of South Carolina did not have this problem, but was shaped by its abandonment by whites. While abandonment of land and property happened across the South, when Union occupation came, the South Carolina Sea Islands saw total abandonment by whites, leaving behind over 10,000 formerly enslaved people. This meant that at the beginning of Union occupation before enslaved people from neighboring towns and states arrived, there was a

²⁸ Murrell-Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 64,80.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 90.

thriving Black population. This had been the home of the Gullah Geechee people for several generations.³⁰ The islands were home to hundreds of acres of cotton plantations, which caught the eye of Edward L. Pierce and other Northern speculators. The land, paired with the already trained labor force, made the Sea Islands a boon for Northern investors and free labor advocates. Here, the newly freedpeople had access to agricultural employment and more housing than elsewhere. Although they, like Craney Island, were protected by naval ships, they were, nonetheless, vulnerable to Confederate attack, exposing the formerly enslaved people to possible re-enslavement.

Each of these varying topographies are important to understanding dynamics of power and dependence, as well as the nature of the relationships between formerly enslaved women and northern missionaries. In locations where there was a lack of food and shelter, missionaries faced that dearth too, making them rivals for whatever the army could supply. Experiences of this dearth, alongside the harshness of changing weather, the fickle nature of military rule, and sickness, though experienced differently, were shared by formerly enslaved women and missionaries alike. Both confronted this terrain and sought to create life on it, while also encountering one another for the first time. For many enslaved women who fled to Union lines, these new places were the furthest they had traveled, of their own accord, in their lives. Encountering new places, new Black people from various parts of the South, and northern abolitionists, both Black and white, were all new experiences. Missionaries also experienced the unfamiliarity of both geography and enslaved people. For the likes of Laura M. Towne, it must be acknowledged that hers was the first encounter with enslaved people, and with the southern climate. While this does not take away from the dynamics of power, class, and racial

³⁰ Ibid, 88.

insensitivity among missionaries, it adds a dimension that must be considered. The contraband camps were marked, for all who lived in them, by unfamiliarity.

The periodization of this study is intentionally constrained to the Civil War years based on two framing ideas. First, emancipation was far from finalized during the war itself. Enslaved women moved through the war with an acute awareness of the precarity of the freedom they strove to build. Thus, this study focuses on efforts made during the tumult of war, rather than the efforts made in peacetime. It does not, however, move chronologically as the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation does not appear to have affected the day-to-day lives of those who resided behind Union lines, beyond bringing Black women into even clearer focus in contraband camps, because countless men were removed for the war effort. Second, the war itself tore apart the social infrastructure of the South and destabilized Southern slaveholder power in a way that provided the enslaved with momentary pathways to pursue and make Black freedom. The war provided a particular set of opportunities and obstacles for enslaved women, both of which changed after the war.

Foregrounding formerly enslaved women's contribution to both defining and building freedom requires new methods. While they do not appear in the archives as authors of many documents, they can be found in the pages of documents written by aid agents, missionaries, soldiers, chaplains, superintendents, and others who lived among them during the war. Thus, published and unpublished accounts, diaries, and correspondence written by these figures are predominantly the primary sources used. These documents grant access to the day-to-day actions and words of formerly enslaved women, as well as to their experiences in Union occupation and missionary aid. In these letters, missionaries recount interactions with formerly enslaved women, as well as their own observations of patterns of actions which the authors interpret for

themselves. Rereading these sources to retrieve Black stories requires the missionaries' interpretation to be less significant than the observed patterns of action. For example, where Elizabeth Hyde Botume perceived the women's song, "We must fight for liberty," as evidence of their ignorance, it is necessary to doubt her conclusion and ask further questions about what the women believed their freedom was. While these sources have traditionally been used not only to tell the stories of their authors, historiographically, it is evident that the authors' analyses are often taken at face value, and are left somewhat uncritically examined. Thus, extracting their observations of formerly enslaved women illuminates what Black women were doing behind Union lines, while analyzing their conclusions separately allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics between the aid workers and formerly enslaved. Doing so centers the Black actors, whom the author may not have intended to be the main subject, becoming an innovative approach that yields a plethora of sources in which we may catch a glimpse of Black women where historians once saw archival absence.³¹

It is also clear throughout this project that there are certain missionaries and narratives that are drawn from extensively. This is because those who wrote and published their accounts of their years among the freed people in the south may have written one book, but within it lie hundreds of interactions with freed women. Thus, that quantity and a broad variety of examples can be found within one archival source. Drawing from the same source is acceptable when the author is not the subject but those who are featured.

³¹ Constructing an appropriate methodology has been informed by those employed by historians of Black women's history including, Thavolia Glymph, Tera P. Hunter, and Marissa J. Fuentes, and historian of Black culture Dylan Penningroth. Repurposing primary sources traditionally used to examine the world of their principal subjects is a method employed by each of these historians in ways that have reconstructed a dynamic world of the enslaved and newly freed people.

These sources and the approach to them are critical to uncovering Black women's daily efforts to build freedom. Focusing on the day-to-day experiences and actions of Black women allows us to examine their ideas of freedom beyond those that are often ascribed to them.³² Their experiences, alongside their actions and conversations, are significant instances of defining Black freedom that transformed contraband camps and Union occupation into sites of liberation. These definitions are collated from the personal expressions of newly freedwomen, most of which would never be enunciated or delivered in the political arena. Yet, it was often those moments, like Peggy's opportunity to tell the truth about her master, or take rest under the shade of a tree, that Black women's definitions of freedom come into focus. While Black freedom became a legal and political status, it had, at its heart, holistic facets that could not be claimed only by law, and had to be claimed by the people themselves. Exploring first their decisions to flee to Union lines or remain on the plantation, their confrontations with the harsh realities of survival behind Union lines, the experiences of Black Northern missionaries, and, the efforts of the newly freedwomen to build free homes, this is a study of the fullness of freedom that Black women sought, and the aspirations that drove them to sing, "We must fight for liberty!"

³² Thavolia Glymph highlights that Southern Black women were indeed involved in antislavery politics, including the formation of the "Colored Women's Relief Association" in New Bern, North Carolina. She argues that in "ways large and small, black women joined their antislavery politics to the nation's larger political goals and their own emancipatory ones using familiar democratic discourse." This study does not examine Southern black women's endeavors in formal abolitionism and political activism but focuses instead on their day-to-day expressions and assertions of rights and freedom. Glymph, *The Women's Fight*, 91.

CHAPTER 1

“She was Hunting Freedom:” Black Women’s Efforts to Leave the Confederacy

Lying in the corn-house where her master had imprisoned her, an enslaved woman moaned unabatingly. The heavy iron shackles that wore into her flesh were a security measure, preventing her from running away as all the other enslaved people of this plantation had already done over the “troublesome times” of the Civil War. It was 1865 and she was the only one left. During the day, she dragged herself around the kitchen, catering to the needs of her master. After a full day, the shackles made it almost impossible to stand. She often wept as she reckoned with the impossibility of reaching free soil.

But this night was different. Her cries were not the only thing piercing the night. She could hear footsteps shuffling hurriedly around the plantation and her master’s urgent commands to move quickly. She lay in wait for what would unfold next. He had shackled her because her labor was invaluable to him, yet she listened quietly as the family fled without a thought of her, immobilized, alone, in the corn-house. Shortly after she heard the wagon trundling away, there were more footsteps, calls for surrender, and horses approaching. Yankees! She mustered energy enough to moan louder. Louder, and louder still, she cried out for help. She would not be left to die of starvation in the place of her captivity. Soon enough, a Yankee soldier heard her, broke down the door, and helped her out of the corn-house.

It was the 10th Army Corps following the advance led by General Sherman and his army, soldiers already notorious for their merciless march through Georgia. After seeing her and her badly injured feet, they made no more efforts to help her, for they had use only for able-bodied

freedmen who could serve the Union military effort. She thought they would be her “Moses,” shepherding her to freedom, but on Sherman’s orders, freedwomen (and other freedpeople who could not be used for labor) were discouraged from following the army.¹ She remained shackled, dragging her feet, just as she had through the kitchen to serve her master, desperately trying to follow the soldiers to free soil at Port Royal, South Carolina. Her “muscles were fearfully strained and swollen,” her “eyes were ready to start from their sockets,” and by the time they got to Port Royal, she could only crawl to the house of missionaries stationed there. She was so wounded, it seemed that she would die.

She survived, although, after much delayed medical attention and months of recovery, she lost the use of her feet. Still, she rejoiced saying, “Thank God, I’ve found freedom at last! Dear blessed Lord Jesus,” and celebrated that she had not given up her pursuit of free soil. “She was hunting freedom.”²

* * *

For many thousands of enslaved women, leaving the plantation, getting out of the Confederacy to reach Union lines was a crucial and treacherous component of their freedom. Even after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 which declared free the enslaved people within the Confederacy, their efforts to escape Confederate territory continued throughout the war. From the vantage point of many enslaved people, freedom depended on escaping Confederate territory, and their stories of escape reveal much about the context that made

¹ David Smith, *Sherman’s March to the Sea 1864: Atlanta to Savannah*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2012), 30.

² Reconstructed from missionary Elizabeth Hyde Botume’s account of a conversation with a newly freedwoman. Elizabeth Hyde Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1893), 141.

running away possible, the values that informed the decision to run, and the means required for a successful journey. As Stephanie Camp highlights, although “freedom had no specific location... and resided in no certain destination,” it is clear that freedom had “a spatial nature” during the war. Enslaved women asserted their mobility, an action that had guided their creations of rival geographies throughout enslavement.³ Whether choosing to become fugitives, or to remain on plantations, examining their accounts of their experience during the war, reveals some of what Black women believed their freedom should entail.

Black women made informed decisions based on their assessments of the viability of running away. The progression of the war throughout the South unstitched the fabric of Southern society and its intricately built infrastructures of power and subjugation. This made running away a much more viable option for Black women, but their assessment of the realities of their specific contexts shaped their decisions about risking escape. In some cases, enslaved people found their opportunity in being abandoned by their masters (like the unnamed woman who followed Sherman’s army with shackled feet). Throughout the Confederacy, masters, mistresses, and their families deserted their homes and their enslaved people in an effort to evade the approaching Union army. In February 1862 after the Union occupied the city of Nashville, Tennessee, barely days passed before newspapers reported the “Great Panic:” the mass exodus of Confederate sympathizers and slaveowners from the city. Church services were canceled, and the streets bustled with wagons filled with their prized possessions, family members, and enslaved people, traveling further into the interior of the Confederacy.⁴ This was not unique to Nashville, Tennessee, but took place across the South. Most unique were the Sea Islands off the coast of

³ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004), 117.

⁴ Walter Durham, *Nashville: The Occupied City, 1862-1863*, (Nashville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008), 32

South Carolina, which were so thoroughly deserted they were left inhabited solely by formerly enslaved people. The islands became the “Port Royal Experiment,” in free labor.

In other cases, many enslaved people sought to escape when masters made plans to sell or remove them into the interior of the Confederacy. As the Union occupied southern cities and Confederate slaveowners fled their homes, they sought to protect their property rights by moving their enslaved people to land they owned, or relatives owned, deeper in Confederate territory, commonly Louisiana and Texas. Black women consistently assessed the viability of running away, oftentimes deciding to take a chance often at moments of crisis like this.

Many Black women who reached Union lines cited their masters’ plans to remove them to the interior as the catalytic event that pushed them to make a break for freedom. In Portsmouth, Virginia, one young Black woman told a missionary that she and twelve others escaped the previous night from her master because “he sent off south two hundred slaves at one time,” and only kept her because “she made him think she was a strong secesh.”⁵ Being removed deeper into the South made it more difficult for enslaved women to escape, though many did, because it plunged them deeper into the Confederacy. Not only did removal take enslaved people far from Union lines, but it also made the journey to Union lines even more treacherous than it already was. Tens of miles to Union lines were more viable than the hundreds of miles that would require hiding and help to protect them from roaming slave catchers.

Thus, the success of the thirteen who reached Union lines was not a product of chance, but one of consideration and clever planning. It is likely that this woman and the twelve she ran with, hatched a plan to convince their master of their loyalty to the family and Confederacy so that they would be allowed to stay on the plantation, which was much nearer to Union lines. It is

⁵ H.B. Arnold, “Monthly Report, Portsmouth, Virginia, January 30, 1864,” American Missionary Association Archives (AMA), Box 175, H1-5267, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

likely that their master departed with the two hundred enslaved people, and left them behind to look after the property. This misguided trust, coupled with his absence, made running away much easier. In this instance, the prospect of removal was a moment of crisis, which could have led to their sustained enslavement, but they transformed it into a freedom opportunity.

Trickery played an important role in escape. Much like the woman who avoided escape to the interior by pretending to be a staunch Confederate, another group of enslaved people on St Helena Island tricked an overseer about their escape. As the Union approached, the overseer commanded the enslaved people under his supervision to “all keep out of sight,” from the Union and, were they to land on the island, to “cut and run and hide where nobody can find you.” The enslaved people did not simply obey, they actively deceived the overseer, saying, “Never fear. We’ll run for sure. We’ll run so de Debil hisself couldn’t catch we!”⁶ One woman, who had been the cook, went even further to convince the overseer of the success of his anti-Union propaganda, saying, “We all hear ‘bout dem Yankees... they has horns an; a tail. I’s mighty skeery myself.” She assured him she had packed her things and “w’en I see dem coming I shall run like all possess.”⁷ Sufficiently assured that they would protect themselves as enslaved property by following his instructions, the overseer felt free to save himself and rode away to the mainland. As soon as he disappeared, they called after him, “We gwine to run sure enough; but we know the Yankees an’ we runs that way.”⁸ While the overseer sought to use cartoonish horror stories of the Union to strike fear into the hearts of the enslaved people, they used the intel he gave them to inform and ensure their successful escape. When necessary, Black women and men played into the racist ideologies that portrayed them as gullible and naturally obedient to white

⁶ Elizabeth Hyde Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1893), 13.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

authorities when doing so would allow them to achieve their own desired outcomes. Thus, even when using trickery, it is evident that Black women had thoughtful tactics that made their escape a product of their intelligence, not just lucky opportunism.

On Craney Island, Virginia, another Black woman described to missionaries the fear of removal that led to her flight. Enslaved as a domestic worker, she recalled her master telling stories of how the Yankees would whip them and send them to Cuba, to retain their loyalty. However, on the morning he “ordered all the house servants to the field... then into a wagon,” she “hid away and saw all the others driven Southward.”⁹ Unlike the group who fled to Portsmouth, Virginia, this woman did not have an opportunity to plan her escape but instead seized a moment that presented itself. She thought the chaos of the sudden removal would allow for her absence to go unnoticed, and her success proved her right. Although she had not planned ahead for this moment, it is clear that in the brief time she had to make her decision, this woman weighed the chances of her master’s tales about the Yankees being true with the known reality of what she would endure if she remained with her master and no Union lines close enough for her to reach. The woman rolled the dice on the Union, likely based on her knowledge of her master, demonstrating her assessment of options. In both instances, these enslaved women seized narrow windows of opportunity to forge a path to freedom.

Black women’s success leaving the plantation was dependent upon accurate information about the progression of the war. Realizing this, they innovated to gather intelligence that would make their freedom seizing efforts most viable.¹⁰ Enslaved women needed knowledge of the

⁹ Sarah Chase, “Dear Ones at Home, February 7, 1863,” in Henry Swint (ed), *Dear Ones at Home: Letters from Contraband Camps*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press), 42.

¹⁰ “Intelligence” is used throughout this section rather than “information” because the wartime context meant that while Black women were not on the battlefield, they were dependent upon the military developments of the war. Simultaneously, Black women’s efforts to reach Union lines and build their own freedom was a war in itself which required them to move as incisively in battalions of their own.

progression of the war to know where Union lines were located. Additionally, knowing their enslavers' intentions were similarly imperative to any plans for escape. One woman who had made it to Union occupied Beaufort, South Carolina shared, with a missionary, her creative way of gathering intelligence while she served her mistress as a waiting maid. The woman recalled that as she would help while her mistress got dressed in the morning, and "if massa wanted to tell [her mistress] something, he used to spell it out," thinking that her illiteracy would render his speech unintelligible to her. However, the waiting maid memorized the letters he used as best she could and "as soon as [she] got away" would run to her uncle "an' spelled them over to him, an' he told me what they meant." Another woman, who likely worked as a field hand and could not get close enough to their masters' conversations to eavesdrop, explained that her father would go with "the other boys to crawl under the house" where they would lie "to hear massa read the newspaper to missis, when they first began to talk about the war."¹¹ Listening in on these conversations and newspaper readings allowed enslaved people to know both the progress of the war and their enslavers' opinions and planned responses.

Listening was helpful even on the Sea Islands of South Carolina, where masters and mistresses fled, leaving behind enslaved men, women, and children. Women shared their stories of escape while they sewed together, and one newly freedwoman pointed to the oak tree that hung above the piazza that once belonged to her master. "See that big oak-tree there? Our boys used to climb into that tree an' hide under the long moss while massa was at supper" so that they could hear him with company, "talk about the war," while they smoked on the porch.¹² There, the boys would listen carefully and relay everything they heard to their mothers who then made plans accordingly. It is likely then that those who remained where their masters fled understood

¹¹ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 7, 6.

¹² *Ibid*, 6.

that running to Union lines may not be necessary, but, rather, they could wait for Union lines to come to them. Black women, men, and children worked collectively to piece together information that would serve as the deciding factors as to what their pursuit of freedom would look like.

Accurate information combined with Black women's geographical knowledge to equip them for the journey. Throughout enslavement, enslaved people created spaces for themselves and their kinfolk by running away even for a short time. As Stephanie Camp argues, while enslaved people were often rendered immobile, especially enslaved women, they created "rival geographies" to that of slaveholding whites. The enslaved made rival geographies by forging hidden paths that could be navigated through reading "the sights and sounds of the environment," or the sky, landmarks, "distinctive trees and shrubs and outbuildings." They created hidden pathways leading to meeting places that were far from where whites could find them.¹³ Thus, the tactics Black women employed to gather intel and fortify the success of their escape plans were not new in the Civil War era. The generationally-passed knowledge of the terrain surrounding the places of their bondage proved even more useful when Union lines brought free soil into the South. No longer did women use the intelligence and geographical knowledge to simply "venture out" for a night and return, but they used it to get them to Union lines.¹⁴

Removal was not the only impetus for running away. When Black women ran away, they were often driven by a determination to secure freedom for more than themselves. Many women assessed the risks incurred by staying, for them and their children, outweighed the unknown risks

¹³ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004), 6-7.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 120.

of recapture and life behind Union lines. On St Helena Island, South Carolina, one missionary spoke with several women about their flight from plantations, learning of the relative protection running away could bring. One woman fled her master's plantation on the coast of South Carolina, braving a journey to Union lines that, while not long, was filled with the risk of being caught especially as she traveled with her two young children. Describing the "hard work to escape," she recounted "sleeping in the marsh and hiding all day" to evade capture. With two small children, the risk of being caught was notably high, but protecting them gave energy to her steps. This woman's perception of the risks of running changed after seeing her eldest child, a (likely) teenage son, be whipped to death by her master as he "was suspected of trying to join the Yankees."¹⁵ Such a violent episode jolted this woman into acting out her belief about what her children deserved.

Like the generations of mothers before her, she could not protect or defend her teenage son from the violent attack of their master, but she could protect her other children by running away to Union lines. She ran the very same day her eldest son was murdered, a traumatic experience that racked her with grief she refused to have repeated. To be sure, it is unlikely that the violence she witnessed was new. However, the loss of her son, the heightened threat of violence to herself and her younger children, and the hope of protection lying behind Union lines made running the most viable option for her and her family. Prior to the Civil War, it was common for enslaved men, and sometimes women, to run away to avoid or delay violence, but running with children to protect them was a difficult, and thus rare, feat. This woman moved decisively, driven by the determination to protect her remaining children, demonstrating the

¹⁵ Laura M. Towne, Diary entry, April 18 1862," in Edith M. Dabbs Collection of Papers Relating to Saint Helena Island, S.C. #04285, Folder 4, 13.

belief that freedom itself, and pursuing freedom, meant the ability to protect one's children from violence, and oneself from recurring loss.

Even when Black women could not escape themselves, it is possible that they made plans for their children's escape. The enslaved women of Davidson County, Tennessee became increasingly known for their insubordination, though many did not run away. While some ran, others "lost their respectful manner & generally... dislike their owners more than anyone else."¹⁶ This dislike translated to a plan of escape for the child of a mother who knew she would have no such opportunity. Joel, a young, enslaved boy, was made to ride a horse accompanying the drawn carriage of his mistress on a business trip to Murfreesboro, where Union soldiers were stationed. Upon their arrival, instead of waiting by the horse as instructed, Joel ran away into the bustle of the occupied city. His mistress spent the day searching for him until she at last "found him at headquarters," where he reluctantly came out to the carriage. When the woman ordered him to get back on the horse and ride home, he boldly told her, "You have no business to take me out of town. I intend to stay and go to school and be free. I won't go." The woman's cries to the Union soldiers who stood observing the altercation went ignored, and she found herself "burning with rage," as she, and George, an enslaved man who accompanied them, tried to catch and whip the boy into submission. But they failed. As he ran into the crowds, Joel shouted back, "goodbye- don't you ever come back here for me- joy go with you." Upon her return home, the woman looked forward to torturing Joel's mother with the grief of his being lost, expecting her to "be frantic," yet found her "perfectly calm" seeming not "to regret it."¹⁷ The reaction of Joel's mother seems to suggest that it was no surprise that he had run away and that she had instructed

¹⁶ Bettie Ridley Blackmore, January 1864, in Sarah Ridley Trimble, "Behind the Lines in Middle Tennessee, 1863-1865: The Journal of Bettie Ridley Blackmore, *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, Vol 12. No.1, (March 1953), 70-71.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 71.

him to do so. While she did not see an opportunity to run away herself, she understood the Emancipation Proclamation and explained its implications to her son, who then pronounced his rights directly to their mistress' face. It is clear that this woman's determination for freedom did not solely apply to her hopes for herself but pushed her to secure freedom for her child even when it seemed impossible for her.

This sentiment is further evidenced by the pronouncement of joy from an unnamed woman who had reached Craney Island, Virginia with her children. She shared with a missionary that "she should die very happy, feeling that her children can spend 'the balance of their days in freedom, though she had been in bonds.'"¹⁸ While the woman of course hoped to live in freedom with her children, the emotional burden of her children being enslaved simply by being born had been lifted for the first time in generations. While Black men fathered these same children, Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh argues that Black women occupied a unique position as those who carried the "bulk of the responsibility for the biological and social reproduction of enslaved humanity," forever bearing the "moral paradox of conceiving, birthing, and raising children for integration into a system that would demean, assault, and degrade them."¹⁹ The Civil War transformed enslaved women's reproductive and parenting labor, making them bearers and stewards of freedom in a way they had been denied for generations. Thus, sending her child, Joel, to Union lines even though she could not go, and another mother rejoicing that her children would be free even if she were to die, held a deeper meaning than a simply selfless idea or hope. Black women understood that freedom would be generational and fundamentally change the futures of those yet to come.

¹⁸ Lucy Chase, February 13 1863, Craney Island, Virginia, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 41.

¹⁹ Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh, *Souls of Women Folk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2021), 2.

The racial and sexual complexities that existed in the plantation world sometimes made leaving with their children less viable for some Black women. A Black woman named Ary was “forced to leave behind” a young child when she ran away from her master’s plantation because the child’s father was the master’s son. She reminisced upon his fondness of the baby who “he was never tired of playing with,” as well as his anti-slavery and Union sentiments, both of which were quashed by his father’s commitment to secession and slavery. When the war came, her child’s father was taken off by the Confederates who forced him to fight for them. She went on explaining that he wrote to her encouraging her to leave because “the baby was very white and looked just like him,” so would be better off with him than with her.

When the time came for her escape, her lover’s brother, who perhaps was too young to fight, vowed to take charge of the baby and told her to “hurry to the Union army.” Trusting him, Ary left for the Union, hoping that one day they would all be reunited. Unfortunately, after four weeks behind Union lines, Ary received a letter from the baby’s father stating that their baby had died. Though sad, he told her that she “must not grieve, that it was a great deal better off now than it would be with” her, and encouraged her to marry if she “found anybody [she] loved.”²⁰ This story is a complex one that immediately provokes questions about the nature of Ary’s relationship with the son of her enslaver. However, amid these complex sexual dynamics, is a Black woman who left her child behind driven by the belief that it would have a better free life by passing rather than building freedom as a Black child. She and her white lover saw the opportunity for her freedom but simultaneously knew that racial hierarchy would not be overcome by Union victory, rendering their relationship and child unviable in the world the Civil

²⁰ Lucy Chase, April 1, 1863, Craney Island, Virginia, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 55-56.

War was making. This reveals the limitations of Black women's understanding of their freedom building efforts and the different ways achieving "freedom for we" could play out.²¹

Some women ran away precisely to avoid separation from their loved ones. Susanna had been enslaved on mainland South Carolina her whole life and when Union occupation came, her master tried to convince her she was safer with him by telling horror stories of Yankee cruelty. Susanna told a missionary that "she did not believe the Yankees would hurt her" and so she hid "when starting time came," running to Union lines after her master's wagons were far gone. Susanna hid not only act to preserve herself from removal but because "she did not want to leave her husband."²² Her husband was likely enslaved on a different plantation and removal would have led to a separation that neither of them may have outlived. Therefore, Susanna prized their unity so highly that running away proved to be the only viable way to make that happen since her master had determined to take her away to the interior.

The importance of preserving kinship ties and familial closeness as part of their free lives cannot be overstated. Throughout enslavement, the domestic slave trade severed Black families. Mothers often saw their children sold away, as well as husbands, relatives, and friends. Where possible women took risks to reunite with their family, even just for a night. Frederick Douglass famously told of his mother who had been sold to a distant plantation, walking twelve miles in the night to see him for a few hours, leaving early enough to get back for a full day of work in the field the following day.²³ Douglass' mother was not the exception but, rather, the

²¹ Additionally, the cause of the child's death is unknown. Because she did not mention sickness, and the cruelty of her master who had sold off "ten cargoes of negroes," and was violently secessionist are known, the child's death provokes some speculation. While she shared that her lover's sisters did not disapprove of the Union and shared his anti-slavery values, the master had his own son tied up and carried away to impressed Confederate service. Thus, it is possible that the child died as a result of illness or violence at the hands of its enraged grandfather. It is impossible to know but worth considering as it further demonstrates the risk Black women took when attempting to discern the best course of action for their children.

²² Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 16.

²³ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office: 1845), 3

rule. Women who ran away during the Civil War, with children and family in tow, or driven by retaining familial connection, partook in a longstanding tradition of Black women's fugitive efforts.

Most often, Black women had little to no control over the whereabouts of their loved ones and spent a lot of their time behind Union lines in search of them. Missionaries noted that Black mothers were often looking for loved ones who had been sold away many years ago, and the reunions of those who had never expected to see one another again.²⁴ Thus, it is unsurprising that where Susanna saw an opportunity to retain closeness to her husband, she decided to risk running away no matter the potential villainy of the Union. It is important to emphasize these interpersonal factors that drove Black women's decision-making, as it shows that their decisions, though shaped by wartime possibilities, were not entirely dictated by them. Both Susanna and the aforementioned nameless women, chose to run not just because the option existed, but rather, in response to heightened threats against their most valued relationships: their children and spouses.

It is clear, then, that freedom meant protection of familial and kinship relationships to Black women. Susanna's decision to hide from her master so that she and her husband could stay together in Union occupied territory shows not only that she believed the possibility of freedom lay behind Union lines, but also that freedom meant preserving her relationship with her husband. What is seen in each of these actors is the reality that free soil was so much more than a legal status or an opportunity for mobility and self-determination. To these women free soil, and Black freedom, meant they could restore and protect the key parts of their world that enslavers had ripped away and violated.²⁵

²⁴ Charlotte E. McKay, *Stories of Hospital and Camp*, (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1876), 178.

²⁵ This was not a guaranteed outcome behind Union lines which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Black women's efforts to preserve and protect the most prized parts of their world, be they children, spouses, or kin, is an element of continuity in their intellectual lives that played out in the new action of running away, during the Civil War. Loren Schwenninger and John Hope Franklin highlight that running away proved more difficult for enslaved women, often because they had children. This meant that "it became difficult to contemplate either leaving them behind or taking them in an escape attempt," because "uprooting and carrying children in flight was 'onerous, time-consuming, and exhaustive.'"²⁶ Further, running away proved more difficult because the gender norms of black enslaved people meant they were "enmeshed in networks of family and friends," that depended on their presence. This led to them partaking in what Stephanie Camp termed "truancy," rather than running away permanently.²⁷ With free soil being significantly closer to enslaved people through Union occupation, running with children and networks of kin became markedly easier. Women arriving at Union lines with children in tow became a common sight. Interestingly, the decision to stay in the antebellum era was motivated by the same priorities that prompted Black women to leave during the Civil War: the effort to protect their children.

Where possible, many black women sought freedom for "we," defining freedom communally rather than individually. Further, enslaved people's concept of "we" surpassed immediate family ties, just as it had throughout the pre-Civil War eras. As Tera Hunter highlights, European constructs of kinship failed to "capture the dynamic values and strategies" that people of African descent used to define kinship. Not only in America but throughout the

²⁶ Schwenninger Franklin, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1999), 212; Judith Keller Schaefer, "New Orleans Slavery in 1850 as Seen in Advertisements," *Journal of Southern History* 47 (February 1981), 43-44.

²⁷ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 37, 35.

Atlantic world, enslaved people conceived of kin in “broader more flexible” terms, the result, Hunter argues, of both African cultural heritage and the shared condition of enslavement.²⁸

Thus, throughout the Civil War Black women often ran in groups with other enslaved men and women to protect one another, and to secure freedom together. This is reflected in the countless runaway advertisements that were featured throughout the war. Local newspapers featured these advertisements from owners and county jails alike, in numbers that barely reflect the mass exodus that the war provoked. Many journeys of enslaved women, men, and children were unsuccessful, resulting in their capture and being held in jail until their masters came to retrieve them. The advertisements confirm that a lot of Black women traveled in groups, accompanied by men and children, while others were captured entirely on their own. Those captured were kept, often for months at a time, in a criminalized captivity awaiting their re-enslavement. All runaways risked this on their way to Union lines, especially those who had further to go to reach the Union.²⁹ Nonetheless, running in groups not only enabled them to retain kinship ties but often allowed them to protect one another from recapture.

Traveling in groups did not always result in success. In the coldness of February 1864, a group of enslaved Black women along with three young girls, one boy, and two Black men sought to brave the journey from their plantation in Hernando, Mississippi, to Union occupied Memphis, Tennessee. Perhaps some were blood relatives and others kin from the same plantation, but they sought freedom together, armed with a gun held by one of the men. Days of walking and hiding from Confederate sympathizers and soldiers reached a violent climax upon

²⁸ Tera Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2017), 17-18.

²⁹ Using Newspapers.com and local archives, the fugitive slave advertisements featured in local newspapers can be easily accessed. Local papers, particularly Confederate sympathizing and proslavery newspapers featured these advertisements consistently throughout the war.

their passing Elm Ridge Farm in Shelby County, the home of notorious Confederate spy and smuggler Isabelle “Belle” Edmondson and her family. They had hoped to be past the house before the sun had fully risen, using darkness as their shield, but after seeing the sunrise and an armed white Confederate soldier up ahead, they knew they had failed. Drawing the gun, both of the men strode forward assuring the women not to be afraid, readying themselves to protect the women and children. Standing tall and confident in the knowledge of nearby Union occupation and the Emancipation Proclamation, the two men ordered the rebel to surrender and fired on him. But “no southern soldier would ever surrender to a negro,” and so, “he fired five times,” killing one and wounding the other. The women and children scattered into the woods hoping to evade capture or death, but only one woman and the young boy managed to escape. The rebels captured, tied up, and marched the girls and women back to their master in Hernando.³⁰ In this escape attempt, the group tried both running away together and bearing arms in order to protect one another from attacks and secure freedom together. Though traveling together could result in reaching freedom, it also risked separation and death if their efforts failed. This was the potential cost of hunting freedom.

These men and women believed that their burgeoning freedom included mobility and the ability to defend themselves and their kin from violence and recapture, a freedom that had been denied them for generations. Whether these men stood on the authority of nearby Union occupation or the rights of free men, their efforts to defend themselves were fueled by some understanding of what rights they were due in this new context. This assertion implied that, though deemed fugitives in the eyes of Confederates, they understood themselves as allied with the Union and thus entitled to act out the authority of Union policy. Although they did not

³⁰ Belle Edmondson, “Diary Entry February 15, 1864,” in the Belle Edmondson Diary #1707-z, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

succeed in reaching Union lines and freedom, this group of men, women, and children provide insight into the belief that many held about freedom: that it was a possibility supported by the Federal government that empowered their mobility and self-protection. This was a crucial part of the perceived viability of running away during the Civil War, the belief that the Union was on their side and empowered them to pursue freedom and defy white rebels.

Others ran in groups of kin, or as blood families, and did make it to Union lines together. Mary Barbour was a young girl when the Union occupied coastal North Carolina in 1862. Many years later, she recounted her parents' efforts to reach Union occupied New Bern, North Carolina, a painstaking journey with four children. Mary remembered being awoken in the middle of the night by her father who dressed her in the dark and told her to keep quiet while her mother hushed the younger children. When they left, her father carried one younger child and held Mary's hand, and her mother carried the two small children, rushing through an uncut forest to reach a horse and wagon they had hidden earlier that night. Her parents hid the children on the floor of the wagon, covering them in blankets while they would travel all night, "half asleep an' skeered stiff," and "hid in de woods all day."³¹

Undoubtedly, running away with four children was painstaking and dangerous, but the Barbour parents moved as one, determined to secure freedom for their whole family. Mary's mother was not alone, she ran with her whole family and reached New Bern, where her husband, a trained shoemaker, made boots for the Union army. Running as a family allowed Mary Barbour's parents to preserve their family from separation, reaching Union lines together to build freedom. Togetherness was a simple desire that enslavement could never guarantee.

Additionally, her father's income as a bootmaker benefitted the whole Barbour family and

³¹ Rawick, WPA, vol 14, in Dorothy Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Norton & Company, 1986), 238.

offered them a degree of self-sufficiency that Mary's mother would have struggled to attain had she reached the Union separated from her husband.

Nonetheless, women also ran alone with children and were successful. Bess, an older black woman, proudly relayed how she avoided her master's attempts to move her to mainland South Carolina by lying "down in the rows of cotton." The other enslaved men and women fled to the woods, but her age and weak foot meant that she could not run. Despite her physical limitations which increased the risk of being caught, Bess took Leah with her, who was "such a baby she could not walk far." Not only did Leah slow her down, but she was ill with a cough that Bess "was in mortal fear that she would betray their hiding place." But rather than leave the child behind to increase her own chances of survival, Bess chose to take Leah, making every effort to stifle her coughs "with tea from 'arbs," almost suffocating her "before she would give up."³²

Bess's story horrified the white missionaries who heard it, as they perceived Bess as describing the event with a jovial carelessness for the survival of the child. But Bess spoke with the humor of hindsight of a risk that paid off. Bess' care for the child is evident in her determination to bring her along even though it made Bess' own survival more precarious. Unlike the unnamed woman who ran with her two children, it does not seem that Leah was Bess' child, and yet Bess assumed risk and responsibility for Leah to live free.

Because Black women sought collective freedom, they often faced the treacherous journey with multiple children in tow. On the Sea Islands a missionary witnessed the arrival of a Black woman who she described as a "huge negress." The woman strode into the contraband camp with a "hominy pot in which was a live chicken," on her head, "one child... on her back, with its arms around her neck," and a smaller child "under each arm." She had filled her apron

³² Towne, "Diary Entry November 17, 1862," 76.

with articles of clothing and a dog and pig followed her as she walked.³³ This woman walked onto free soil carrying what she could and prioritizing the things she prized most: the children. No matter the distance walked by the woman, carrying three children made her journey to Union lines a feat of physical strength and an experience of exhaustion and heightened fear. Setting off with the children, this woman tied her achievement of freedom to theirs and evidently sought to provide for them as best she could. This woman is emblematic of the energy Black women expended to build freedom during the Civil War.

“Freedom for we” was also evident in the efforts of women, men, and children’s efforts to bring the sick and elderly to Union lines. On the Sea Islands, one missionary witnessed an elderly man carrying “his sick wife on his back,” and a young boy led his “blind daddy, toting him along ‘to freedom.’”³⁴ Both these instances illuminated the centrality of care and community to Black freedom. Like traveling with children, traveling with the sick and the elderly posed a unique threat to the success of fugitives’ journeys to free soil. However, the bonds of family and kinship, which had been rendered so fragile in enslavement, proved central facets of the free lives they hoped for and worked to make a reality.

For some women and girls, direct connection with the Union and support from Union soldiers helped Black women reach the free soil of occupied cities. In Portsmouth, Virginia, a missionary reported the arrival of a ten-year-old enslaved girl to the Mission House in February 1864. Left alone in the house of her mistress after the death of her father and the selling of her mother, the girl asked her mistress for leave to go. Her mistress “would not allow her to go,” even after the missionaries implored on the girl’s behalf. Yet, much to the missionaries’ surprise, the young girl arrived at the Mission House, the day after they had tried to rescue her, wounded

³³Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 15.

³⁴ *ibid*

and barely covered in a tattered dress. She had been aided by her uncle, a soldier in the U.S.C.T., who “went to the house of the mistress” and threatened “if you do not let the child go to school, I will send a guard after her.” Enraged at this intrusion, the “mistress whipped the child” and told her to go.³⁵ While white missionaries failed to compel the “unholy woman,” a Black soldier had a connection to the Union that granted him a degree of leverage even the missionaries did not have.

Similarly, in Nashville, Tennessee, connection with the Union army provided Black men with armed support for the retrieval of their wives and children. One enslaved man had run away and returned the following year with “a party of 7 armed Yankees” to retrieve his wife and child who were still enslaved. The story spread through the white women who remained in the neighborhood, stirring fear among them. Arriving with the armed support of Union soldiers, the man was still met with resistance from the mistress who threatened to shoot him if “he crossed that door.” Unable to retrieve them, the man left, saying “he would return in two weeks for his wife and child.” Clearly empowered by the support of the Union, the daughter of the mistress noted his “very haughty and consequential air” that accompanied the “brace of pistols” he wore. She was enraged by the fact he “strutted about the house with great freedom, talking loudly and boldly.”³⁶ On occasion, the authority of the Union sided with Black men and women to bring reunion to Black families, shaking the foundations of the social hierarchy in the South.

Women with proximity to Union lines sometimes benefitted from the aid of Union soldiers. Two enslaved women, Jule and Mill, recounted to a Northern missionary, their escape from a plantation only seven miles south of Union lines in Memphis, Tennessee. With the plantation being located near the Mississippi River, Jule, Mill, and their mistress could see the

³⁵ James F. Sisson, “Letter to Rev. Whipple, Portsmouth, Virginia, February 29, 1864,” AMA archives.

³⁶ Blackmore, “Retrospect of 1863,” in Trimble, “*Behind the Lines in Middle Tennessee*,” *THQ*, 49.

Union gunboats approaching. Their mistress “got wild-like,” commanding them “run, tell all the niggers to run to the woods, quick,” and asked: “you won’t go with them, will you?” Mill could see the Union soldiers approaching the house, causing her to feel safe and so responded honestly: “I’ll go if I have a chance.” Jule said “I shall go if Mill goes,” and “I’ll take what children I’ve got lef’,” which sent their mistress into a despairing panic.

Beyond losing her slaves, the mistress feared losing her money and valuables she had hidden away in a trunk, so she begged Mill and Jule to pretend the contents of the trunk were their own. Truly emboldened by Union presence, Jule responded, “I can’t lie over that either.” When the soldiers met them they simply said, “Auntie, you want to go with us... You can all go; an’ hurry, for we shall stay but a little while.” Jule, Mill, and thirty-one others were escorted by Union soldiers from their plantation, along with sacks filled with looted property, while their mistress “followed us cryin’ an’ wringin’ her han’s. Once aboard the Union boat, the freshly liberated enslaved people “cheered loud and long and strong,” offering “three times three cheers” for the soldiers, “gunboat boys,” and the government.³⁷

For Mill and Jule, being so close to Union lines did not guarantee escape from the plantation; they seized the opportunity that presented itself by allying with Union soldiers. This alliance not only granted them safe passage to Union lines, a privilege they could not have assumed even with only seven miles to travel, but it also allowed them to leave openly and boldly. They were able to tell their mistress they were leaving, disregard her threats and distress, and pack up their belongings so they could arrive at free soil with more than nothing. This kind of departure was an ideal that few experienced. Such freedom, ushered in by Federal authority,

³⁷ Laura Haviland, *A Woman’s Life Works: Labors and Experiences of Laura S. Haviland, Fourth Edition* (Chicago: Publishing Association of Friends:1889), 274-275.

could not be deemed theft. Connection to the Union gave Mill and Jule's freedom legitimacy in the face of their mistress.

No matter the method and means by which Black women chose, and were able to reach Union lines, it is clear that they made informed decisions driven by their hopes for themselves and their kin. Leaving the plantation required their determination and intentionality even when they made opportunistic decisions to flee. It is clear, then, that Black women's patterns of wartime movement were not only shaped by new opportunities for mobility (since there was now potentially free soil in the South, behind Union lines) but by their hopes of what they hoped their free lives would be.

* * *

Leaving plantations was not an easy feat, evidenced by the fact that most women, men, and children remained in captivity throughout the war. In reality, approximately half a million runaways made it to Union lines, a minority of the four and a half million enslaved. Considering those who remained on plantations and those who were removed to the interior, it is reasonable to assume that most who remained on plantations could not leave due to heightened surveillance. However, when examining enslaved women who remained, it becomes clear that their decision was not passive or evidence of satisfaction with their condition.

The enslaved women in the house of Confederate spy Belle Edmondson serve as a useful case study of those who remained on the plantation during the war. Belle Edmondson's diary has been used to tell stories of her cunning, bravery, and the strength of her Confederate sympathies that led her to become one of the most well-known Confederate spies. However, embedded in

her diary entries are several Black enslaved women, whose experiences and behaviors shed light on their Civil War world. Bettie, Myra, Harriet, and Margaret are the only ones mentioned by name, but their experiences are legible.

Bettie appears to have been a close and trusted domestic slave to the Edmondson family. She had earned enough trust to be allowed to travel with Uncle Elum, an older enslaved man, to Memphis to smuggle contraband through Union lines to their staunch Confederate mistress. Although described as a “star darkie” by her mistress, Bettie’s trip to Memphis led Edmondson to litter the pages of her diary with her concern that Bettie had fled. A trip that should have taken one day took Bettie and Elum three. Each day, Edmondson wrote about them, first that they “had not returned yet,” then that “another day has passed and not one word from Bettie and Uncle Elum.” She wrote that she “still [had] hope it will be alright,” and the next day rejoiced that her “star darkie” had “come right side up.”³⁸

Captured in June 1862, Memphis became a hub for fugitive slaves pursuing freedom, filling neighboring slaveholders with fear of losing their enslaved property. Although Bettie and Elum disappear into bustling Union occupied Memphis and into the silence of the archive, it is clear that traveling to Memphis on an errand to serve the Confederate cause, also offered them the opportunity to enter Union lines, meet and mix with enslaved people encamped there, and see the realities of free soil. It is unknown what Bettie and Elum did in Memphis. Their mistress did not record whether she asked, but it is reasonable to assume that they got a glimpse of life behind Union lines. Even as visitors, they would have sought food, shelter for the nights they spent there, and experienced three days of life in a military-run location.

³⁸ Belle Edmondson, “Diary entries January 2, 3, 4 1864,” in Belle Edmondson Diary.

Bettie and Elum likely considered staying. Weighing up their options may have been the cause of their delay. Bettie could have stayed without Elum, or Elum without her, and yet they returned to the Edmondson farm, for reasons that remain unclear. It can be argued, nonetheless, that Bettie and Elum witnessed Union occupation and assessed its limitations in terms of the lives they hoped for. Perhaps they saw the destitution, the sickness, and the hunger that their freed counterparts experienced. Perhaps they feared their mistress's proximity to Union lines, knowing they would not have the relative anonymity that they would need to stand a chance. Whatever their reasons, they chose to take full advantage of their newfound mobility, taking it further than their mistress intended, engaging in a defensible truancy.

Seeing the limitations of Union occupation is not a farfetched possibility, as this experience drove many others back to their plantations, particularly for those residing near Union lines. Susanna, a domestic slave to the Harding family at Belle Meade farm in Nashville, Tennessee, is famous both as a slave who not only remained at Belle Meade but wrote to her master who had been taken prisoner by the Union army for his loyalty to the Confederacy. She reported: "Many servants have run away from their homes and sought a new home and a new destiny with strangers. Many who have tried it have returned to their duty repentant and satisfied that their true happiness consisted in doing their duty and remaining in their former condition." She wrote this of enslaved men and women from neighboring plantations, proudly stating, "I am happy to say that so far not one of yours has disgraced himself and you by such conduct," a fact she believed would continue "unless they are tempted and lured away with false hopes of equality and freedom."³⁹

³⁹ Susanna to W.H. Harding, August 25, 1862, in Randall Miller, "Letters From Nashville, 1862, II 'Dear Master'", *THQ*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Spring 1974), 90.

Susanna had evidently heard of, or knew, other enslaved people who sought “a new destiny” behind Union lines and were disappointed by the “strangers” of Union occupation, ultimately returning to their plantations. Enslaved men and women met uninhabitable conditions behind Union lines. Many camps were left deliberately neglected by Union policy and missionaries reported the poverty and suffering that many suffered. Shelter was scarce, as were clothing and food. Though missionaries tried to help, they were “compelled to leave some of them on the street unprovided for”, causing many to die.⁴⁰ Given these conditions, the fact that black men and women would return should come as no surprise.

Though Susanna’s pride and belief that enslaved people’s “true happiness” lay in staying on their plantations and “doing their duty” appear at face value to be a proslavery assertion, her final comments about the potential of “false hopes of equality and freedom” makes her initial statements more complex than that. At the time of the Civil War, Susanna was an older enslaved woman, thus she was undoubtedly familiar with the prayers and hopes of her kin, as well as her own, for freedom and for fuller lives, uninhibited by violence and pain. She likely heard the prayers of others for the coming of the Union, for Lincoln to be their Moses, and for their deliverance. And yet, for reasons we do not know, she perceived the notion that the Union offered “freedom and equality” to enslaved people, to be a false hope.

What can be seen in Bettie passing on an opportunity to remain behind Union lines, and in Susanna’s “loyalty” and commentary on the disillusioned return of enslaved people to their plantations as well as her own loyalty, is not an affirmation of the slave system but doubt in the

⁴⁰ Joseph McKee Diary Entry, December 1863, in Ralph W. McGranhan, *Historical Sketches of the Freedmen’s Missions of the United Presbyterian Church, 1862-1904*, (Knoxville: Knoxville College, 1904), p. 11; for more on camp conditions see, Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 120-145; Amy Murrell-Taylor, *Embattled Freedom: Journeys Through the Civil War’s Slave Refugee Camps*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2018), 57-82.

Union offering them something much more. While they remained in the condition of enslavement, their decision was active. They engaged their options and stayed based upon what their current condition offered them that Union lines could not. There they had access to things they valued. It is clear, therefore, that these Black women acted decisively for freedom on their own terms, even if those actions did not result in flight and free soil.

Staying on the plantation with their dissenting Confederate masters and mistresses, in some cases, lessened the risk of unpredictable violence. This of course varied from plantation to plantation, as many women ran precisely to escape their owners' fits of unpredictable violence. However, the enslaved women of the Edmondson household witnessed dramatic violence that led to the deaths and separations of those runaways who failed in their efforts to reach Union lines. They likely witnessed the altercation between the Hernando fugitives en route to Union occupied Memphis in February 1864, and their Confederate mistress' relative who saw to it that they did not reach Union lines. While a woman and a young boy successfully ran away, one man was killed, another wounded, and the girls were forcibly marched back to the plantations of their enslavement.⁴¹

Edmondson herself did not witness this early morning altercation, but it seems that the enslaved women did, as she met them and the rest of the family outside after hearing the gunshots.⁴² Whether they watched it unfold in real time or ran out to see the commotion, these women witnessed these enslaved fugitives separated, killed, and marched back to their plantation by Confederate soldiers. They heard the soldier refuse and recount his refusal to submit to the Union authority the Black man believed had been bestowed on him by occupation and the

⁴¹ Belle Edmondson, "Diary Entry February 15, 1864," in the Belle Edmondson Diary #1707-z, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁴² Edmondson, "Diary entry April 25 1864," in Belle Edmondson Diary.

Emancipation Proclamation. The miles they had trekked came to a distressing end, and freedom was not realized for any of them.

Bettie, Myra, Harriet, Margaret, and the other enslaved people of the Edmondson household undoubtedly factored this possible fate into their calculations of risk. Pursuing freedom by running to Union lines was a pathway marked, in their case, by violence. Not only did they see the failed attempt of the group, but they saw the unrelenting power of their owners, their extreme and unwavering commitment to the cause (by acting as soldiers and spies), and the unpredictability of the journey to Union lines. Only two weeks earlier, they had been required to accompany their mistress in search of a U.S.C.T. soldier whom she heard was dead and washed up on the banks of Day's Creek. This "awful sight," which their mistress wished she could unsee, likely struck the enslaved women who accompanied her even more. A Black soldier, fighting for the Union, dead, unnamed, alone, and far from free, would not have been a forgettable sight for those who longed for freedom and hoped to secure it.⁴³

By staying, the risk of violence remained in the realm of the known. With their own experiences, they had learned to navigate life and mitigate risks through knowledge of their owner's demands and whims. Running away opened the door to a whole new world of potential violence, and thus choosing to stay does not connote complacency but rather the centrality of safety and security in their constructions of freedom.

Staying put on the plantations of their enslavement also allowed some black women to protect and care for kin and children. Much like those who ran away with children, those who stayed with children undoubtedly held the same value and hope for their children's future. For example, in April 1864, Margaret, an enslaved woman of the Edmondson household, gave birth

⁴³ Ibid, "Diary entry April 12 1864."

to a healthy baby, much to the surprise of her mistress who knew nothing of the pregnancy.⁴⁴ Being pregnant meant that the risks of running away were heightened, not only for herself because her pace would be slowed, but for her unborn child. If her baby was to experience freedom, she needed to reach it herself, and thus the reality of violence, lack of shelter, and general destitution that she could meet behind Union lines would have threatened the life of them both.

Further, Edmondson notes that she had not known about the pregnancy, but also that Bettie, Harriet, and Myra had been with Margaret in their quarters and had helped through the delivery. The secrecy suggests Margaret's and the other enslaved people's efforts to protect her from potential sale, or the arrangement of a sale once the baby was born. Giving birth with the help of her plantation kin allowed her to benefit from their knowledge and experience delivering children as well as their help with the baby. Staying maintained kinship ties that were not only life-giving socially and emotionally, but offered practical support and care that could not be guaranteed were they to make a break for Union lines. Thus, while some women ran for the future of their children, other women stayed for precisely the same reasons.

A final note from the enslaved women of the Edmondson household: remaining on the plantation often allowed them to retain access to education, a key component of freedom that Black women valued. Almost daily in Belle Edmondson's diary, she remarks upon the lessons that Laura, her sister, and Bettie, a domestic enslaved woman, had that day. She does not elaborate on what the lessons contained, but nightly lessons took place.⁴⁵ Whether these were lessons in reading and writing, numbers, or the Bible, access to learning was a much-prized longing of enslaved people across the South. Education, particularly learning to read and write,

⁴⁴ Ibid, "Diary entry April 15, 1864."

⁴⁵ Ibid, "Diary entry May 8, 1864."

proved to be a major objective of newly freed women and men, as they believed it would enable them to secure freedom by elevating themselves through the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Thus, being in a position that allowed them to enter and leave Union lines on behalf of their mistress, avoid the unpredictable violence of running and the poverty of Union camps, as well as retain kin and learn to read and write, meant staying on the plantation became an unexpected but foundational step in the building of freedom.

While this analysis is limited to one plantation and the experiences of four enslaved Black women, the glimpses we have demonstrate the decisive actions that lie beneath what may appear to be passivity wherever such women appear in the archive. Black women sought freedom even without seizing their newfound mobility, choosing to gamble on their own wisdom over the unknowns presented by the Union. Remaining near food, shelter, and relative safety were, not only mitigated the risk of unpredictable violence, it provided access to learning, the preservation of kinship ties, and the future of children. These, they believed, were components of freedom. These are the things that they were unwilling to risk. Additionally, it is clear that for these women, and for both those who stayed and ran, freedom was not an abstract idea or a principle. Freedom was something they understood to have tangible facets that would shape their worlds, much more than it was a philosophical, legal, or political ideal. These women's choices show that, to them, if freedom were to be realized at home or abroad, it would provide them with the things they believed to be part of the full free lives they wanted to live.

* * *

Reaching Union lines did not guarantee permanent deliverance out of the Confederacy for enslaved women. The very presence of free soil in the South simultaneously brought the potential of free lives as well as fragility to that very potential. Being surrounded by Confederate territory and for some, being close enough to enraged slave owners meant that the borders of free soil were consistently porous throughout the war. Much like reaching Northern states and entering the refuge of Black communities and the protection of abolitionist and vigilance committees, could not fully protect freedom seekers who utilized the Underground Railroad from recapture by slave catchers, reaching Union lines did not guarantee security. The fragility of the terrain upon which Black women sought to build their free lives is central to understanding their fight to secure freedom as well as define it. Black women were, for the most part, on their own, striving to create free lives while defending against threats on all sides.

The way Union occupation functioned meant that Union lines were not always safe-havens. As Thavolia Glymph argues, not only did Congress mark “arbitrary political parameters” of free soil, within those, the ideas of Union officials, aid agents, and missionaries “conditioned the type of freedom black women could pursue.”⁴⁶ These occupied territories were often lost during subsequent battles, leading to recapture by Confederates, forcing Black women, men, and children to move with Union forces to another location. Battles made much of the newfound free soil ever shifting sands for the duration of the war. The chaos of wartime also meant that Union policy was mostly localized, led by the military governor of that state, and then even more locally by the Union officials on the ground in each Union base. Some Union generals and military governors issued wartime policies that protected and made space for enslaved people’s arrival- like General Butler’s first iteration of the Confiscation Act in Union occupied Virginia,

⁴⁶ Glymph, *The Women’s Fight: The Civil War’s Battles for Home, Freedom and Nation*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2019), 223-224.

in May 1861. Other Union officials refused to make allowances, or could not, due to a lack of resources to support the Black people who sought to come within Union lines.

Thus, while the Union often served as a means by which enslaved women could reach Union lines, they often served as agents of separation. Union occupation and its plans for the “contraband” Black people, particularly in the early years of the Civil War, was not a uniform or tidy process. Throughout the war, the number of enslaved men, women, and children that fled to Union lines far outstripped the Union’s capacity to contain or provide for them. One soldier in New Bern, North Carolina remarked upon the flood of enslaved people who arrived in March 1862, saying, “Stealing in from every direction by land and sea- in squads from 6 to 30 each- they come and dump themselves by the fence.”⁴⁷ Even superintendent to the freedpeople in North Carolina, Vincent Colyer, described that as many as “one hundred at a time, leaving with joy their plows in the field... to follow our soldiers.”⁴⁸ These realities were true throughout the Union occupied South and thus the Union struggled to accommodate the enslaved who reached their lines, often accepting some while sending others away or leaving them behind.

For example, military governor Andrew Johnson, a proslavery Unionist, refused to make accommodations for the thousands of Black men women, and children arriving in Nashville or other bases of occupation in Middle Tennessee. Johnson advocated that the newly freedpeople be “left alone,” arguing that opening contraband camps and providing supplies would attract “the dross” and promote laziness among them.⁴⁹ This lack of provision from the top meant that while men could be utilized for military labor, and after 1863, could enroll in the army, women and

⁴⁷ R.R. Clarke to Dr. J. G. Metcalf, April 26, 1862, box 3, folder 5, Civil War Collection, AAS, in Judkin Browning, *Shifting Loyalties: The Union Occupation of Eastern North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2011), 101.

⁴⁸ Vincent Colyer, *Brief Report of the Services Rendered by the Freed People to the United States Army in North Carolina*, (New York: Vincent Colyer, 1864).

⁴⁹ “The Condition of the Negroes, Nashville, Tennessee, November 23, 1863”, Johnson, Andrew, LeRoy P. Graf, Ralph W. Haskins, and Paul H. Bergeron (eds). *The Papers of Andrew Johnson, Andrew Johnson Papers*, Vol.6, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1967), 488.

children were uniquely vulnerable to the underfunded and makeshift camps that arose as a result of Johnson's neglect. Worse still, Black women were sent to plantations to provide free labor for the Union, and, in other cases, were sent back to the plantations they came from if they were near enough. Thus, while many Union soldiers aided Black women in reaching Union lines, others were responsible for returning them to the plantations they had worked hard to leave. In Pulaski, Tennessee, a general order was issued that declared:

It being impossible to feed the large number of negro women and children coming to our lines, and it being a part of the policy of the Government to protect them, it is hereby ordered that the commanders of posts and provost-marshals return them upon their plantations with written instructions to the proprietors to ~feed and protect them. Stock, produce, and forage will be left on such plantations in sufficient quantities to support them...⁵⁰

Union officials returned female slaves who had fled their plantations to their masters. In doing so, the Union essentially acted in accordance with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, transforming themselves from the deliverers enslaved women hoped and believed them to be, into dreaded slave catchers. These were the “strangers” Susanna of Belle Meade believed unworthy of her trust, and rightly so. In the eyes of masters, and the state, their slaves had become fugitives, the ultimate act of insubordination, and while accounts of the events that followed the return of slaves lie in the silences of the archive, it is not difficult to assume the treatment these slaves suffered at the hands of their masters.’

Beyond being forced back to their plantations, Black women in contraband camps could be forced to relocate at any given point. Moving around with Union battalions as they progressed

⁵⁰ Lieutenant Barnes, November 19 1863, *Official Records of the Civil War*, 2:31:3:195

through the South, Black women could be removed and sent to abandoned plantations to fend for themselves. Black women lived with this insecurity throughout the entirety of the war. St. Helena's Island was rocked by rumors "that all women are ordered out of the department," and women expressed consistent concern that "all is uncertainty." On this same island, soldiers interrupted a Sunday morning service, "guns in hand," to which the "people rushed from the church to the woods" and hid in their houses, for fear of the men being impressed into labor or forced to leave. The missionary lamented that "it is a shame that the people cannot worship in peace."⁵¹ Indeed, even once within Union lines, peace did not mark their new context, nor did security. Even while the Union provided free soil, Black women did not feature at the top of the list of priorities and were subject to the needs of the Union.

Another missionary on the Sea Islands witnessed an occasion of mass separation firsthand. After the Union occupied Beaufort, South Carolina, the nearby islands, which had been abandoned, continued to be home to those formerly enslaved there, but also became home for those who had run to Union occupied South Carolina. Getting to the islands required Union boats to shuttle newly freedpeople there. As the boats approached Black women, men and children were seen "huddled together... screaming and gesticulating in the wildest manner," hoping to get on board. Others, so desperate to make it to the islands, "leaped into the water, trying to wade or swim to the boats" before they reached the shore. When the boats came in, the missionary watched the hope and fear mingled on the faces of the women, men, and children who "rushed frantically to them, begging to be taken on board." The boats could not carry all the people waiting, and so the "youngest and the strongest," made it while the old were left behind. The missionary lamented the scene she saw where, "Mothers were separated from their children,

⁵¹Towne, "February 23 1863," 85; Towne, "April 27 1863," 109.

and ‘old parents’ were overlooked.” While some were kept in the guardhouse, others were “left behind unprotected.” Knowing their fate could be recapture by the Confederates, many rushed into the water, trying to swim to the safety of the islands, while “uttering the most heartrending moans and wailings.”⁵² This instance on the coast of South Carolina reveals the fragility of Black families and kinship ties, even when they had reached Union lines. A successful journey together did not guarantee their building freedom together after their arrival. While Black women and men planned their escapes, they could not plan for the conditions they met and the capabilities of Union territories.

Separation haunted the freedom building efforts of Black women who did reach Union lines. On Fripp Island, South Carolina, a missionary visited some Black women from her school. When she asked how they were, Susan answered that though her companions felt well, she did not. No matter how she tried she expressed she could not “feel right with five boys all gone,” with not so much as a finger tip of any of them left. She explained that “two carried off by Seccesh, one with a Captain of ours at Fort Pulaski, not heard from since Christmas, and now two gone yesterday.”⁵³ While she expressed gladness that three of her sons went to help the Union effort, relaying a sense of duty, she lamented their loss and longed for their return. For Susan, separation had come to her family through a variety of means, Confederate recapture and Union service, Susan’s sadness reflects the hope for her unified family to be a part of her free life. Running to Union lines did not secure this facet of freedom.

These instances of separation were not unique. Indeed, families and kin being separated proved so common during the Civil War, that the post-war years were marked by regular newspaper advertisements regarding lost loved ones. The ads placed in local newspapers, and

⁵² Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 14-15.

⁵³ H.W., May 13th, Fripp Point, South Carolina, in Pierce, *Letters from Port Royal*, 43.

often reprinted elsewhere, throughout the late 1860s right through the turn of the century featured pleas from fathers, mothers, siblings, and ex-comrades, all searching for loved ones they had not seen in years. These advertisements reveal not only the commonality but also how separation occurred. While most advertisements were for those who had been sold away long before the Civil War, those regarding the war years further demonstrate the porous nature of Union occupation and many adversities Black women, men, and children faced while building freedom.⁵⁴

One major cause of separation proved to be the continuation of the domestic slave trade. While the postwar newspapers were littered with lost relative advertisements, the Civil War newspapers featured “WANTED” advertisements for enslaved workers, even after the Emancipation Proclamation. For example, in the *Nashville Daily Union*, advertisements for cooks and domestic servants abounded throughout the war, a need that correlated with the runaway crisis and the newfound mobility of enslaved women. These advertisements can be found throughout the newspapers of the South and demonstrate the thriving of the domestic slave

⁵⁴ The condition of the Black family has been a focus of debate for many years. E. Franklin Frazier and Stanley Elkins argued that enslavement stripped Africans and their descendants of their culture, which subsequently implies the destruction of the Black family where culture would be passed. Herbert Gutman argued that although challenged by the harshness of enslavement, the enslaved managed to “develop and maintain meaningful domestic and kin relationship arrangements,” which truly met the greatest strain during the Civil War. His argument was in response to the damaging accusations of the Moynihan Report, which argued that the destruction of the Black family “broke the will of the Negro people,” causing the “deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American.” Writing over 20 years later, Brenda E. Stevenson argued the limitations of this argument, highlighting the impact of the domestic slave trade as “one of the defining characteristics” of enslaved life, even in the colonial era, making two parent households a rare occurrence. Indeed, she argues that sale and hiring out was so common in the Upper South in particular, it had a “lasting and profound effect,” on Black domestic lives. Further, Stevenson argues while many enslaved men had diminished domestic roles, the nuclear family structure was not the only style of family formation that Africans and African descended peoples considered important. Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), xvii; Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 207, xii. For more on the Black family see, E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, (University of Michigan Press, 1939); Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Nell Painter, “Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting,” in Nell Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002); Heather A. Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Lost Family in Slavery*, (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 2012).

trade which resulted in ads like that of Charity Moss. Moss and her two sons had been enslaved in Nashville, and according to her advertisement in *The Colored Tennessean* in the fall of 1865, they had each (seemingly recently), been sold away from each other. One son was sold in Nashville, the other in Rutherford county, while she was sold in Nashville and sent to Alabama.⁵⁵ By the placement of her advertisement, Charity Moss had made it back to Nashville, likely in the hopes of reuniting with her sons. Her efforts by traveling back to Nashville, Tennessee, likely, mostly on foot, alongside her advert illuminate her determination to have her family reunion as part of her free life.

As a result, Black women longed for security, a crucial prerequisite to building freedom, and a component of freedom itself. The women of Crane Island, Virginia, expressed their fears about being moved by the Union to the missionaries sent to aid them in their freedom building, saying, “I don’t want to go on a ery farm.. I don’ want to leave Crane Island,” because they preferred “the comparative security of the island, to the uncertainties of the distant mainland.”⁵⁶ Being moved back to the mainland meant that they would be surrounded by Confederate territory again and the potential of being taken back by their owners, or experiencing violence at the hands of Confederate soldiers.

Being on the island her master, and all the other slaveowners, had abandoned did not make Bess feel safer. Living in a small hut on St. Helena’s Island, Bess, an elderly woman, agonized over her wounded leg which would hinder her if Confederate forces were to attack the island. “Oh de terrible night. I so ‘fraid dey all run and me not a foot to stand on. Dey mustn’t leave me. Oh missus do ease my leg. What poor Bess do when dey all take to de woods and me

⁵⁵ Charity Moss, “Information Wanted,” *The Colored Tennessean*, October 14, 1865. accessed via: <https://informationwanted.org/items/show/916>, December 2021.

⁵⁶ Lucy Chase, “Dear Ones at home, April 1, 1863,” *Dear Ones at Home*, 59.

cant go. Must stay here for massa to kill. Dey kill me for sure.” While the missionary tried to still her panic with the assurance that they would not kill women, knowing better than that, Bess told her she “was sure she would be shot.”⁵⁷ Bess’ ailment forced her to externalize the calculations all the women and men of St. Helena’s Island made consistently throughout their time behind Union lines: knowing and planning for escape in the case of attack. While Bess did not express concern about removal by the Union, the threat of owners returning was a fear they swallowed daily.

Fearing the return of their masters was not baseless. The same missionary that tended to Bess’ leg recorded that “one of the owners of the place came back several times,” specifically looking for Rina, his child’s nurse, and Bella. While Rina “always hid in time... Bella was caught.” The son of Savannah was also “carried off,” and though he tried to return he was captured again “whipped and kept in the stocks.”⁵⁸ These women made efforts to hide, as did the broader community. For some, those efforts worked. For others, they did not, thus the fear of recapture loomed large in the minds of women in contraband camps.

On occasion, Union officers thwarted the efforts of owners to retrieve their “property.” For example, a mistress broached a contraband camp with the hope of making her domestic servants return. Despairing over her newfound poverty since she “never made a cake o’ bread in my life,” she begged the women to return with her. When they refused, she implored a Union General to make at least the cook to go back with her, to which he said “if your cook wants to go wid you, she may,” but if not, “I can’t help you madam... she is free and can do as she likes...”⁵⁹ In this instance, General Grant legitimized the enslaved woman’s claim to freedom and

⁵⁷ Towne, “Diary entry May 1862,” 27-28.

⁵⁸ Ibid, “August 15 1862,” 58.

⁵⁹ “About a week,” *The Liberator*, 22 August, 1862, in Sterling, *We are Your Sisters*, 239

determination not to return to her mistress' house, a protection that was not afforded all women within Union lines. But owners did not always come pleading for their enslaved property to return, they utilized military power by conducting violent raids of camps to retrieve them by force. On May 20, 1864, Confederate soldiers raided Morgan Island, a Union occupied location that had become the camp of formerly enslaved men and women, off the coast of South Carolina. While an official camp was established by Union forces, "the point [was] so exposed," they could see the boats approaching. Seeking defense, several of the island's inhabitants rowed to the nearby Union blockade gunboat but the captain "replied that he was put there as a blockade, not to defend the coast and would do nothing." The soldiers, made up mostly of men "whose homes had been on these lands," landed on the island and "threatened the people with death if they made noise," tying some up and forcing others to carry "corn, chickens, pigs, potatoes, everything these poor negroes had worked for... even their clothing" to their boats.

A freedman saw this happening from afar and warned the rest of the island, telling them to hide and protect themselves, while another down at the shores convinced the soldiers that there were Union pickets further into the island. Though there were none, the man pointed to the houses of the freedpeople saying, "see dem candles... niggers no hab candles, massa, dem de pickets." Believing this, the soldiers committed to holding their fire to save escalating their raid. Knowing that shots would not be fired allowed several of the captured men and women to run into the woods. A mother "got off unseen" into the woods, but saw that her two children had been caught and were tied up on the ground. Frozen with fear, she hesitated too long and her children were carried off. Contrastingly, Mary "was the only one to offer violent resistance, she "yelled and fought" though they knocked her to the ground repeatedly and tried to tie her up. She

“fought and bit and screamed so frantically that they feared her noise and loosed her.” She fled into the woods and escaped.⁶⁰

The looming fear of recapture had come to pass on Morgan Island. The following morning the missionaries noted the “great alarm” of the people, with one woman refusing to “sleep in the house at night for fear her old owner should find her.” While the people did not want to leave because “their crops were there” and they had made homes there, they also had sought defense and defended themselves the best ways they knew how. Inhabiting camps in Union occupied territory did not eliminate the threat of recapture and whether on islands or the mainland, owners forced their way into camps and Confederate raids dragged countless men and women back into slavery.

According to the post-war lost family advertisements, many were separated by Confederate raids like that on Morgan Island. Situations like this were not easily resolved, leading to newspaper advertisements wherein families sought reunion. In 1868 a formerly enslaved woman named Louisa West was still searching for her son who had been captured by Confederates in Union occupied Jonesboro, Tennessee, in 1865. According to the paper, West knew that her sons had been taken to Richmond, Virginia, but he had “not been heard from,” since.⁶¹ Confederate raids were particularly harrowing for this reason; while sales often left loved ones with some knowledge of the family to whom they were sold and their potential geographical location, Confederate capture left no such clues. Loved ones were taken and could be reenslaved by sale or as captors, or impressed for Confederate service. No matter what

⁶⁰ Towne, “Diary entry May 21 1864,” 205-209.

⁶¹ Louisa West, “Information Wanted,” *The Union Flag*, June 5, 1868, accessed via: <https://informationwanted.org/items/show/1658>, accessed, December 2021.

happened after their capture, those who were left behind knew they had been taken by violent men who had no interest in protecting them or care for their kinship ties.

Black women made up the majority of the contraband camps' population, particularly after enlistment in 1863, and so were particularly vulnerable to recapture. Fighting for themselves, and Union officers refusing to aid their rebel owners were the only defenses these women had. The porosity of Union lines made for women building freedom to always be in a state of flight or preparation for flight. Free soil in the Civil War was, in fact, shifting sand that provided Black women with somewhere to go but not as much somewhere to be. Building free lives while constantly on the defensive was not unique to wartime, and would mark the efforts of free Black men and women for generations to come.

Despite these threats, Black women still strove to reach Union lines because they had deeply rooted ideas about their own freedom. Formerly enslaved women understood freedom as a state of being that was not entirely tied to their material condition. Their stories of departure and the confusion of Northern missionaries about Black women's determination to build freedom demonstrates missionaries' limited understanding of the condition under which the enslaved lived, despite their commitment to its demise. One woman who had escaped to Union occupied Norfolk and ended up on Craney Island came to a missionary hoping she would read the Bible to her. As they settled in, the woman shared briefly about her own escape, saying that the "white folk didn't think nothing of her after she left off dancing."⁶² The image of an enslaved woman leaving the plantation of her enslavement dancing confused the missionaries, likely because of the destitution they faced on Craney Island. However, this woman's dancing juxtaposed with her enslavers' seeming indifference to her departure reveals that the Black woman understood she

⁶² Lucy Chase, February 7, 1863, Craney Island, Virginia, *Dear Ones at Home*, 39.

had much more at stake in building her freedom than her enslavers did in losing her. She left dancing because her enslaved condition was no more, not because the freedom she hoped for had entirely been realized.

Missionaries often did not understand this sentiment, or what Black women were willing to endure to claim freedom. On another occasion, white missionaries observed the “pleasing, intelligent women, who serve[d] as cooks,” at the mission house. One woman explained to the missionaries that “she was very willing to take her share of suffering,” while securing her freedom. The other women chimed in, in agreement, saying, “they would suffer still more, rather than again become slaves.”⁶³ This sentiment was perhaps the most expressed to missionaries throughout the South by formerly enslaved women. The destitution in which they often said this, cannot be understated. And yet, these women understood freedom first meant that they were no longer owned property with no authority over their own lives. These sentiments coupled with Black women’s subsequent actions to secure, define, and build freedom for themselves and their people, demonstrate that Black women’s ideas of freedom were both deeply philosophical and practical. Where missionaries saw their newly freed status as that of a lower and impoverished class who may have been better off in their previous condition, Black women cherished their freedom and sought to build on what they had secured for themselves.

Black women strove to build free lives, both those who ran and those who remained on plantations throughout the war. While focusing upon Black women’s efforts to define and secure freedom behind Union lines, it is clear that contraband camps were no safe haven, nor were the Union consistent allies. But rather, in Black women’s efforts to leave plantations, and the lives they led by remaining, it is evident that Black women’s movements were decisive. They made

⁶³ *ibid*, 41.

deliberate and incisive movements and were driven by certain definitions of what their free lives could be. Black women began to act on their ideas of free lives that allowed their families to stay together, that promoted their ability to defend and protect kin and children; that allowed them to mitigate violence, and granted them access to certain resources they deemed central to a free and full life. Just as the uncontrollable forces around them “conditioned the type of freedom they pursued,” these beliefs about freedom “conditioned” their pursuits, serving as the impetus for their actions, both failed and successful.

That the significance of Black women’s efforts for freedom for “we,” for togetherness, and the ability to protect one another were some of the central components of freedom, cannot be understated. The condition of enslavement robbed Black women of much more than legal personhood and citizenship rights; the peculiar institution, intentionally disrupted the relationships of Black people, using violence and separation, in order to control the Black population and maintain slaveowner supremacy. Thus, for Black women in the Civil War, it is likely that the possible restoration of their relationships, and an ability to make choices that would better the condition of their children and kin, were at the forefront of their minds. Free soil presented itself as a place to build family, make homes, and build lives that were free in all the ways they desired most.

CHAPTER 2

“Beset by Bad Men:” Black Women and the Shadowed Pathway to Freedom

It was June 1862, and business had been steady for Sally, a Black dressmaker. Since the Union occupied Newbern she had watched the town become flooded with thousands of enslaved men and women hoping to get their freedom. They were also hoping for clothing that reflected their burgeoning freedom, when they could afford it. Joe, the husband of her friend Susan, had wanted her to make a dress for his wife, something she had needed for a long time, and could finally afford. But when he came to collect it, Joe told her that he was leaving Susan and the dress was now for his new sweetheart, Martha. According to Joe, Susan had started drinking and “received visits from the soldiers,” which “offended [his] dignity.” As she listened, Sally recalled the threats of sexual violence she and many others faced daily since occupation, as well as how many had fallen upon hard times and used all they had to feed themselves and their families. Which it was for Susan, she did not know, but she knew that losing her husband for what may not have been her choice, or a very difficult choice, would leave her even more vulnerable. So, she refused to give the dress to Joe. Day after day, he returned, demanding the dress, and day after day, she said no, not unless it was for Susan. Not unless he saw sense and stayed with her.

One evening she visited Susan to find out what happened but she would not speak –she just lay on the floor of her small room. Eventually, Joe returned with a white Yankee soldier. Bursting into her shop, the soldier ordered the dress to be finished and delivered to Joe, who was paying for it after all. The soldier guarded her shop, patrolling back and forth while she quickly finished the dress with shaking hands. When she was done, the soldier grabbed it and gave it to

Joe who thanked him profusely for helping him in the matter and “went on his way rejoicing.” Sally was left alone, winded from holding her breath in the presence of the threatening soldier, sorrow and relief mingled together as she finally let out a trembling exhale.¹

* * *

Black women who made it to Union lines, and those who stayed after their masters abandoned the plantations, were uniquely vulnerable to poverty, sexual violence, and limited opportunities to earn money. While men were often welcomed by the Union for the labor they could add to the war effort, Black women were frequently turned away and not considered viable options for employment. This reality, alongside the long-standing history of sexual violence against Black women, made building freedom behind Union lines a challenging and dangerous undertaking. Much like the women in the opening vignette, the politics of racialized gender and sexuality existed behind Union lines, forcing many Black women’s efforts to define and build freedom for themselves to take shadowed and dangerous pathways. All Black women were forced to navigate the potential experience of rape, particularly with such proximity to army bases. All sought work, but only some ended up embroiled in the booming wartime sex trade. In both instances, Black women’s efforts to protect themselves brought them closer to Union legal infrastructures which occasionally aided their efforts, and other times led to new forms of

¹ This vignette was a constructed using the diary entry of Union soldier William J. Creasey. The names are imagined, chosen from a roster of former enslaved men and women who were known to be in New Bern, North Carolina in June 1862, as the soldier refers to each actor as a “negro.” William J. Creasey, June 14th 1862, Newbern, North Carolina, in New Bern Occupation Papers, North Carolina Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

captivity. It is worthy of note that the most intimate freedom Black women valued, their sexual agency and protection, became one of the most controlled aspects of their newly freed lives.

In the instance of the dressmaker, there were competing perspectives at play. From the perspective of the soldier who handled the case between the dressmaker and the disgraced husband, the matter on the table was one of property that had been paid for. Thus, the story features in his diary as a petty dispute, that he did not expect to have to resolve, between two nameless Black people. Despite the framing of his account, there was much more at stake, and at play, from the perspective of the dressmaker, the man, and his unexamined wife. It is clear that the woman's husband assumed that she had simply been unfaithful to him, taking up with military men until she was caught by him. While this could be the case, it is equally as likely that she had been the victim of rape or had chosen to alleviate their wartime poverty through prostitution. The dressmaker doubted the latter possibility and held her own ideas about the truth of the matter.

This serves as an appropriate vignette for the exploration of Black women's sexual agency during the Civil War, as it demonstrates the difficulties encountered when analyzing Black women's sexual experiences without the testimony of the women themselves. While patterns of behaviors and choices can be and have been analyzed throughout this project to understand the beliefs Black women had about freedom, the deep racialization of their sexuality, alongside the sexual subjugation they faced under enslavement, makes it very hard to parse out their Civil War experiences without their own accounts. Thus, most of the examined instances of sexual violence, engagement in the sex trade, and relationships of coercion or advantage discussed in this chapter, unveil the world Black women had to navigate and the unique vulnerability these constructs created for their efforts to build freedom.

For newly freed women in the Civil War, self-governance and protection (legal and social) of their bodies, in terms of their sexual agency, was undoubtedly a complex facet of the freedom they hoped for. While the most intimate, Black women's sexuality had been under their control throughout enslavement. In seeking to define what being free meant to them and what they hoped it would include, the realities of sexual violence rose to the foreground of their minds. After all, their reproductive labor that propped up the institution of slavery. Centuries of hyper-sexualization had labeled them inherently sexually deviant, untrustworthy, and insatiable. These prescriptions made Black women uniquely vulnerable to sexual violence, particularly by white men. Considering their position during the Civil War, first as contraband and then newly freed people, they navigated freedom building with undefined legal rights and with the specter of their perceived hypersexuality looming over their every move.²

This deep history of the sexualization of Black women is precisely what makes the incident with the dressmaker so ambiguous. As a woman experiencing Union occupation herself, the dressmaker understood that Black women were uniquely vulnerable to sexual assault by white soldiers. Union soldiers approached Black women with sexual entitlement. Socialized by the Victorian ideals that elevated white women for their purity and chastity, and denigrated Black women as lewd and licentious, white men from the North were just as much a threat to formerly enslaved women as their former masters had been. White soldiers' pursuits of Black women were so constant in occupied Norfolk, Virginia and the surrounding area, that the camp on Craney Island had been initially created to put greater distance between the newly freed

² Black women's sexuality and bodies served as a central pillar of the racialization of African and African descended peoples. From the time European explorers first encountered Black women, European men remarked upon their seeming lack of pain during childbirth, their stature built for hard labor, their voluptuous bodies that differed from the bodies of white women. Historian Jenifer Morgan highlights that Englishmen who travelled to Africa described the native women they encountered as "unwomanly and marked by a reproductive value that was both depended on their sex and evidence of their lack of femininity." Jenifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 12-14.

women and Union camps. Thus, questions of Black women's proximity to Union soldiers, and of race and gender were at the "forefront of the military's strategic thinking."³

On the Sea Islands of South Carolina, Military governor, General Rufus Saxton, remarked "on the presumption of white male sexual prerogative" that he had witnessed on the islands. According to Saxton, not only were the Black women "held as the legitimate prey of lust," they had been "taught it was a crime to resist a white man, they had not learned to defend their chastity. Licentiousness was widespread; the morals of the old plantation life seemed revived in the army of occupation."⁴ Saxton believed that the Black women of the island "had not learned to defend their chastity," suggesting that their willingness was as much to blame as white men's advances. Saxton's evaluation presumed that these women could defend themselves. Enslavement depended upon the sexual subjugation of Black women, and as a result, this subjugation became a key component of white superiority. Therefore, even in freedom Black women struggled to protect and defend themselves against the advances of white men, as to do so challenged their place in the caste system.

In 1863, Abraham Lincoln gave Black women unforeseen legal protection with the Lieber Codes, which defined rape as a war crime regardless of the race of the victim. This law brought both Black and white women under the legal protection of the Federal government, allowing formerly enslaved women to bring claims of sexual violence to court. This was the first time in the South that the rape of Black women was a legal reality.⁵ Crystal Feimster argues that,

³ General Dix drafted the order, stating that the camp be created to "remove women and children from contact with the [military] camps- a contact injurious to both." Maj. General John A. Dix to Hon. Edwin Stanton, December 13, 1862, in Amy Murrell-Taylor, *Embattled Freedom: Journeys Through the Civil War's Slave Refugee Camps*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2018), 87.

⁴ General Rufus Saxton to Edwin Stanton, Port Royal, South Carolina, December 1864, O.R., 3:4:1029, in Ella Forbes, *African American Women During the Civil War*, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 228.

⁵ Crystal Feimster, "'What if I am a Woman: Black Women's Campaigns for Sexual Justice,'" Gregory P. Downs and Kate Masur, *The World the Civil War Made*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015), 256, 2560.

in New Orleans, Black women “did not hesitate to make use of the Lieber Codes,” taking their cases to the Military Commission. She demonstrates their willingness to take advantage of the military courts as evidence of their efforts to resist sexual violence.⁶

Black women sought to defend themselves using the law but were often met with unhelpful Union officials and biased trials. This is evidenced by the reported rape of a formerly enslaved woman, submitted to the Union army by herself and her father. At Fortress Monroe, Virginia, “four soldiers went to the house of two colored men (father and son-in-law.)” Upon entering the house, they grabbed “a colored woman in the front yard, each in turn gratifying his brutal lusts, while the other stood guard with sword and pistol.” The soldiers “succeeded in ravishing the young woman in the house, in the presence of her father and grandfather,” beating the latter who cried out in her defense. After the incident, the woman went with her father to Union officials to report the rape but was met with the dismissal of her case upon the basis that “there were then some fifteen thousand soldiers at Newport News and the villains” could not be found.⁷

The presence of both her father and grandfather did not stop the white soldiers from forcing their way into the home and upon the woman. White soldiers’ entitlement to Black women depended also on their entitlement to dominate and constrain the actions of Black men. Protections from the men in their community were nearly impossible, especially considering the imbalance of punishment. White men in most Union occupied locations who were even tried for raping Black women, were most often dismissed from the army, facing hard labor or

⁶ Ibid, 258.

⁷ F. Perry Letter: Campbell and Pickens, in, Stirling, *We Are Your Sisters*, 239-240.

imprisonment less frequently, unlike Black men who could be put to death for the rape of a white woman and could serve lengthy sentences for violence against a white man.⁸

Even General Benjamin Butler decried this inequality after presiding over a case in which a white man was sentenced to ten years of hard labor for raping a black girl named Jeanie Green. Butler was deeply displeased by the events in which a “female negro child” gotten free of enslavement only to reach “the limits of the Federal Government,” and receive “brutal treatment from an officer.” His disillusionment did not stop there. Butler noted that a Black man had recently been hanged for the attempted rape of a white woman and thus “equal and exact justice would have taken this officer’s life.” Not only did the officer receive a lighter punishment, but he was also subsequently released a few months later by order of Abraham Lincoln.⁹ While Black women could finally seek legal recourse for sexual violence perpetrated against them, their ability and right to protect themselves using the law were limited and unequal to their white counterparts. Thus, Saxton’s belief that all Black women had to do was learn to defend their chastity, is the assumption of a man unable, or perhaps unwilling, to see the lack of power of Black women and men, both slave and free, had before the law and in American society.

* * *

⁸ Susan Barber and Charles Ritter argue that the Union strove to “render fair and impartial justice,” even though their quantitative analysis showed that there was evidence of racial stereotyping of “black women and girls as more appropriate sexual prey,” and unequal punishment. Their analysis of twenty-six court-martial cases for women raped by black and white soldiers, in Virginia, reveals that of the twenty white assailants, only four were executed, and of the six black, five. All of those who faced execution were on trial for raping white women and girls, meanwhile those who had assaulted black women and girls received lighter sentences which were often mitigated. It is clear that the courts strove to “render fair and impartial justice,” to protect white womanhood, but did not deem sexual violence against black women as grievous. Susan Barber and Charles F. Ritter, “ ‘Physical Abuse... and Rough Handling:’ Race, Gender, and Sexual Justice in the Occupied South,” in LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long, *Occupied Women: Gender and Military Occupation and the American Civil War*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2009), 63.

⁹ General Court Martial File #NN-2099: Lt. Andrew J. Smith, RG 153 NARA, in Barber and Ritter, “Physical Abuse,” 65.

Where women did engage in the sex trade, many formerly enslaved women sought to protect one another from judgments made about their occupation as sex workers, and experiences of sexual violence. While many women were able to secure work as cooks, laundresses, and sometimes nurses for the Union throughout the Civil War, many struggled to find work enough to earn a living. Having an understanding of the limited options for earning money, as well as their limited ability to protect themselves from white men, Black women did not judge one other; rather, they offered protection. The unnamed dressmaker's refusal to give the customer the dress she had made for his wife because he was leaving her for "receiving visits from the soldiers," serves as an example of this protection. It is clear that she did not assume the woman's infidelity, but rather knew the likelihood that she had been raped by multiple soldiers or had decided to sell sex to supplement her husband's income. Either way, the dressmaker's refusal was an attempted act of protection of her kin. This woman had been targeted by the Union soldiers even while married; thus the dressmaker likely understood the increased vulnerability she would face if abandoned by her husband. Additionally, the soldier's authority was demonstrated by her inability to refuse to give over the dress, thus indicating that Black women could not ignore the power of Union soldiers, or refuse to comply with their orders.

The dressmaker was not alone in her efforts to defend a sister in pursuit of freedom. On the Sea Islands of South Carolina, Black women utilized group advocacy to defend one another. A white missionary to the Sea Islands recorded the efforts of a group of women on behalf of a new mother in the camp.¹⁰ The women planned to go to the missionary's house, getting there

¹⁰ Elizabeth Hyde Botume was a Boston born missionary of the New England Freedmen's Aid Society, deployed to Beaufort, South Carolina in 1864. She remained on the island until 1902, working as a teacher at Port Royal for almost thirty years. Elizabeth Hyde Botume, "Among the Freedmen, 1864," in Albert Bushnell Hart (ed), *American History told by Contemporaries: Volume IV, Welding of the Nation, 1845-1902*, (New York: Macmillan & Co, 1901), 445.

before she had arrived from visiting others around the camp. As she approached, the women told her they had “kum fur see you fur some very pertikler business,” which she made them wait to share. Though the missionary tried to discourage their efforts by making them wait while she spoke with some missionary friends, whom she deemed more important, they waited patiently, saying “us ain’t hasty.” When she finally attended to them, they told her about “poor sick Cumber,” who had “gone to bed an’ have a fine gal” but was “bad off. Her punish too much,” by which they meant she had suffered too much. The missionary caught on to their intention and tactic, understanding that they “wished to bear united testimony in poor Cumber’s case” because they “knew very well we would have nothing to do with one like her.” Cumber had become pregnant by engaging in prostitution. The women had nothing but tenderness and concern for Cumber, and their “readiness to help the poor erring girl” made the much more reluctant white missionary “ashamed” of herself. She and the other missionaries sought to make an example of their “down-fallen sisters,” by refusing to help them, but the group successfully compelled her to have mercy and give an offering of clothes for Cumber and her baby.¹¹

On another occasion, Judy, a Black nurse, sought to advocate with the same missionary for another “down-fallen sister,” utilizing double-speak to persuade the hard-hearted white woman. Rising early in the morning and going to the missionary’s home, the black nurse implored her, “O missis, ef you could jes’ pit your eyes on her, it would hurt you. Her’s that bad off, you mus’ feel sorry.” But the missionary refused to hear anything of the woman, declaring, “she knows better than to live as she has done.” Why Judy cared was lost on the missionary, but Judy’s sympathy came from beholding her destitution, and from the kinship of their being enslaved by the same master. Much like the other case, the missionary sought to make an

¹¹ Elizabeth Hyde Botume, *First Days Among the Contraband*, (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1893), 122-124.

example of the woman and declared, “I have said I would do nothing for that girl, and I must keep my word.” To her, acquiescing to Judy’s request equaled endorsing these women’s choices, which she could not do. Judy had tried almost everything to evoke the sympathy of the missionary but she had one tactic left to employ. She looked down, feigning resignation and submission, and said: “That so, ma’am. You knows best. You mus’ be right, fur you’na kin read the Bible, an’ so you mus’ know best.” As she spoke, she curtsied and turned, defeated, to leave, saying: “But I has to go now to the gal, poor creeter. Them wimmins is waiting on me.” Her apparent submission to the missionary’s religious superiority worked like a charm, forcing the latter to reflect on how she did, indeed, read and know Scripture more than the woman. She remembered that those same Scriptures said, “Let him that is without sin cast the first stone.” She quickly sprang up and ran after Judy, calling her back to get something for the poor woman. She bustled quickly to make up a “bundle of clothing and groceries,” and the woman praised her graciousness saying, “God bless you ma’am! You ain’t know how glad I is. I shall run back now, an’ all dem wimmins will be so glad too.”¹²

This interaction between Judy and the white missionary woman demonstrates how Black women utilized double-speak, playing into the position the missionaries believed they occupied as moral superiors. Where they could, Black women used the racialized lenses through which missionaries beheld them to their advantage, rather than railing against it or giving up on advocating for themselves. Black women like Judy, who she said would be “so glad too,” did not see prostitution, or giving birth out of wedlock as a result of prostitution, a reason to cast one another out of community. Nor did they see prostitution as a condition that rendered them unworthy of community protection and care. It is evident that Black women did not lack an ethic

¹² Ibid, 126-127.

or moral code, but rather theirs tended to the reality of their context which was one defined by sexual violence, subjugation, and, at best, limited opportunities to make money. Thus, to some formerly enslaved women, engaging in prostitution was not understood as a reflection on the moral character of a Black woman, but rather as a circumstantial reality.

* * *

Although many Black women in similar positions to their “fallen sisters,” defended and protected them without judgment, the decision to engage in prostitution was no small choice. Indeed, prostitution served as one potential path for black women to access greater economic security and freedom, but it also threw them into an underworld in which they were vulnerable to sexual violence and coercion with little to no legal protection in most places. Union occupied New Orleans’ efficacy of laws protecting Black women from sexual violation was unique, but the Union’s efforts to quell the booming sex trade occurred throughout Union occupied locations. This chapter examines both Norfolk, Virginia and Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee, placing them side by side to illuminate the impact Black women’s location could have on their involvement in the sex trade and the freedom that they sought to build. For the contraband women in Norfolk, Virginia, as well as Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee, the Union’s racialized laws regarding prostitution, made the trade particularly precarious for Black women. Even just the suspicion of engagement in the trade by missionaries or soldiers could lead to stripping of Black women’s burgeoning freedom.¹³

¹³ For further reading on prostitution during the Civil War: Danielle Jeanine Cole, “Public Women, Public Spaces: Prostitution and Union Military Experience, 1861-1865,” Masters Thesis, University Tennessee, 2007; John Gaines, *An Evening with Venus: Prostitution During the American Civil War*, (Kerrville: State House Press, 2014); Judith Geisberg, *Sex and the Civil War: Soldiers, Pornography and the Making of American Morality*, (Chapel Hill: UNC

Richmond, Petersburg, and Norfolk, Virginia had vibrant illicit worlds marked by the sex trade prior to the Civil War. Some saw the existence of prostitution, interracial sex and socializing as simply “endemic to city life,” but ministers warned against both, and laws were enacted to illegalize fornication and interracial sex. Historian Joshua Rothman argues that these, alongside prostitution, were “ubiquitous in urban, town, and plantation communities throughout the state,” despite the religious and legal efforts to quash them. Local authorities were particularly concerned with interracial sex, via prostitution or otherwise, punishing white people found guilty of this, or any other illicit behavior, with fines, while punishing enslaved and free people with lashes.¹⁴ Both the history of prostitution in Virginia as well as the zero-tolerance and racialized legal framework, likely informed the policies instituted by the Union after occupation.

During the Civil War, Norfolk, Virginia was flooded with fugitive slaves from near and far who believed freedom could be found and built behind Union lines. Union occupied Virginia was the seed-ground of the First and Second Confiscation Acts, the laws that came out of General Butler’s policy regarding the influx of enslaved men, women, and children to Union lines. Although these laws meant officers could allow the fugitives to remain behind Union lines, Captain Orlando Brown, the Superintendent of Negro Affairs for Virginia’s Second District, believed that was all the Union should offer. He thought “the first and most important lesson to be taught the Freedmen” was “to be providing for their own physical necessities, without being

Press, 2017); Emily Epstein Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness: Sex, Race, and Memory in Storyville, New Orleans*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2913); Crystal Feimster, “Keeping a Disorderly House in Civil War Kentucky,” *Kentucky Historical Society*, Volume 117, Number 2, Spring 2019; Crystal Feimster, “ ‘What if I am a Woman?’ Black Women’s Campaigns for Sexual Justice and Citizenship,” in Gregory P. Downs and Kate Masur (eds), *The World the Civil War Made*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015); Thomas P. Lowry, *The Stories Soldiers Wouldn’t Tell: Sex in the Civil War*, (Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 1994); Thomas P. Lowry, *Sexual Misbehaviors in the Civil War: A Compendium*, (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2006); Aryan Tyson Smith, “The Bawdy Bluff: Prostitution in Memphis, Tennessee, 1820-1900,” PhD Diss., University of Mississippi, 2016.

¹⁴ Joshua Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2003), 97.

dependent upon Government or others.”¹⁵ Many contrabands found work with the Union and private local employers. By 1864 Captain Brown reported that the women worked mostly as agricultural workers in occupied Virginia, while others were transported north to be domestic workers in free states.¹⁶ Nonetheless, historian Michelle Krowl argues that women with children struggled the most to find work. Women, children, and the infirm comprised the majority of the destitute throughout the war.¹⁷ Thus, much like in other Union occupied cities throughout the South, many newly freed women, Virginia, turned to the sex trade to make ends meet.

Union officials of occupied Norfolk implemented racialized policies to deal with the booming sex trade, in a much harsher manner than elsewhere. White women charged with prostitution in Union courts could either face a punishment of 30 days of hard labor at a workhouse, a twenty-dollar fine, or in extreme cases, face expulsion from the city. Conversely, Black women were sentenced to imprisonment on Craney Island, the small island located in Norfolk harbor which had recently been a site of removal intended to separate Black women from the troops.¹⁸ The racialization of the Union’s punishments for prostitution made utilizing the sex trade to secure some version of freedom a particularly dangerous pathway for Black women to traverse. While the reasons for this racialized legal difference were not espoused in the Union or court official records, examination of missionary Marcia Colton, who was commissioned to reside on the Island, reveals the motivations, purposes, function, and dangers of the isolated island women’s prison.

¹⁵ Captain Orlando Brown to Major George J. Craney, December 9, 1864, 7 enclosure 12, V-87 1865, Letters Received by the Office of Adjutant General (Main Series), 1861-1870 (National Archives Microfilm Publication Roll M619, Roll 429, frame 507), National Archives, Washington D.C., in Michelle A. Krowl, “African American Women and the United States Military in Civil War Virginia,” in John Sillant, *Afro-Virginian History and Culture*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 2011), 174.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 178-179.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 174.

¹⁸ Danielle Jeannine Cole, “Public Women in Public Spaces: Prostitution and Union Military Experience, 1861-1865,” Master’s Thesis, University of Tennessee, 2007, 11.

By the time she arrived in Norfolk, Virginia to serve as an AMA missionary, Marcia Colton was a fifty-eight-year-old white woman and a well-seasoned missionary. Born in Monson, Massachusetts in 1806, Colton's missionary impulse led her to pursue a placement with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in 1845. She went west and worked as a missionary among the Native Americans between 1846 and 1851.¹⁹ After this stint with the ABCFM, Colton lived in Springfield, Massachusetts. She received a notable recommendation to the AMA, written by Revered E. P. Rogers, who described her as a woman of "great self confidence" who would "soon address a public assembly of men as one of women." Even before embarking on adventurous missions, Colton had made a name for herself in her congregation as an assertive woman who insisted upon her spiritual right to "address the brethren of the church and admonish them of their duty;" a reputation that led the committee to proceed with caution when accepting her as a missionary.²⁰

Thus, when Colton arrived in Norfolk, in the spring of 1864, she was not new to missionary service. She had served amongst the Choctaw in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma for six years.²¹ With strong Presbyterian zeal and a white middle-class Northern perspective, Colton proved a harsh critic of all she observed in Norfolk and of the women imprisoned on Craney Island. After only a few weeks on the island, Colton described Norfolk as "an awful wicked place... [that] needs to be purged." Throughout her letters, she lamented the lack of religiosity among the soldiers, to the point of atheism, as well as the lack of a Sabbath school, the

¹⁹ Colton stayed in Norfolk, Virginia for six years and moved to Philadelphia where she resided at the "Home for Widows and Single Women of PA." Vinton Books: manuscript., American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions archives, Vol 2., Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, 43-44.

²⁰ E.P Rogers to D. Greene, October 16 1845, ABCFM Testimonials, 18:92, in Susan Huffman Hoyle, "Nineteenth-Century Single Women and Motivation for Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 58

²¹The Missionary Herald, *The Proceedings of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions with a View of Other Benevolent Operations for the year 1847*, Volume 43, (Boston: Press of T.R. Marvin, 1847),13; *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. 27., No. 1., (Oklahoma Historical Society, 1949), 23.

use of “profane language” by everyone, all of which resulted in her moral and social isolation.²² Colton resided on the island for almost one year, as the only missionary and only white woman, making her experience unique among the others posted in other Union occupied Virginian locations.²³

Craney Island was transformed into a prison, named the “Magdalen Camp,” sometime in the Spring of 1864.²⁴ According to Colton the “Military and Moral authorities” thought it a “military necessity” to open the “Magdalen Camp” as “a sort of out doors prison... where they can send these women whom having just emerged from slavery, are beset by bad men,” many of whom were “connected with the Federal army.” These newly freed women were being “led astray from the path of virtue” a condition she, and the army, believed to be “contagious with

²² Marcia Colton to George Whipple, Norfolk, Virginia, May 19th, 1864; Marcia Colton to George Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, November 1, 1864, American Missionary Association Archives, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana (AMAA hereafter).

²³ Throughout this project I have deliberately limited outlining white missionary actors biographies as they can distract from the black women who are the intended subject of this study. However, because Marcia Colton served on Craney Island alone, being the only white woman with whom the imprisoned women interacted, and the appointed judge of their moral stature, it is important to understand the lens through which these women were perceived to more fully interpret their experiences on the island.

²⁴ The choice of the name “Magdalen Camp,” for the prison is a clear reference to the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia, a house of reform for “that class of Unhappy females who have strayed from virtue.” The home, which was opened in 1806 by Quaker reformers, similarly operated in a prison-like manner, with eight-foot tall walls, erected “to prevent the escape of discontented Magdalens and elude prying eyes.” The seclusion intended to isolate “the women from their former associations,” to give the religious influence of the society to take root in them. The first clear difference between the island prison and the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia, is that while the latter employed someone to traverse the sex district of the city to persuade women to admit themselves to the Society’s care, every inmate had come of their own volition. The demographic of the Magdalen Society shifted over time, initially they welcomed all women seeking refuge from the harsh labor of the sex trade for anywhere from a few nights to a few months. However, by the time of the Civil War, the Society aimed to welcome a higher class of women, who were more likely to submit to religious and behavioral reformation, for not less than a year. Nonetheless, from its inception, the Magdalen Society utilized a rigorous program of religious education, devotion, and training for domestic life, which was followed by a placement in a suitable respectable family, where they would remain indefinitely. Both the Magdalen Society and camp’s chosen name, Magdalen, made reference to the Biblical character of Mary Magdalen, the former prostitute who left her profession to become one of Jesus’ close followers and friends. The reference is demonstrative of what the organizers hoped for the women: complete reformation to a pious and virtuous life. Negley K. Teeters, “The Early Days of the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia,” *Social Service Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2, June 1956, 158, 160,162,163; Steven Ruggles, “Fallen Women: The Inmates of the Magdalen Society Asylum of Philadelphia, 1837-1908,” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 16, No. 4, July 1983, 65; Lu Ann De Cunzo, “On Reforming the ‘Fallen’ and Beyond: Transforming Continuity at the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia, 1845-1916,” *Journal of Historical Archaeology*, Vol. 5, No. 1, March 2001, 27.

others.” This necessitated their being “arrest[ed] and sen[t] to the Island... for their reformation.”²⁵ As a rule, measures against prostitution were considered a matter of “military necessity,” due to the number of soldiers who were rendered out of action due to venereal disease. In this initial description of the island prison, it seems that the purpose was intended to be mutually beneficial for both the army and the women. However, since it held only Black women, the military’s concern about the contagion of this vice appears to have pertained only to Black women. Black women were deemed a greater moral threat than white women.²⁶

The military’s decision to place the women on the island, and its operation, suggests its purpose was containment and surveillance. Over the year, the island hosted anywhere from thirteen to forty women and girls who had been deemed a threat to the Union army. Historians Danielle Jeannine Cole and Michelle A. Krowl highlight the cases of Black women who were tried and found guilty of prostitution in Norfolk’s Union court and sentenced to six months on the island. However, Colton stated that the women were often “arrested, and... sent here without trial by court.”²⁷ This suggests that while some Black women were tried, countless others were likely imprisoned without trial, making it impossible to conclude that all of the women sent to the island were proven to be engaging in prostitution. This is even harder to ascertain when the false accusations of soldiers in cases of rape, the hypersexualized perception of Black women,

²⁵ Marcia Colton to George Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, May 19, 1864, AMAA.

²⁶ Illuminating this concern with Black women engaging in the sex trade is not intended to suggest that white women engaging in prostitution was acceptable in society at large or the military. There was a complex class hierarchy within the sex trade, with lots of white women partaking in different manners, from the seasonal engagement of streetwalkers (typically incredibly poor white women), to kept women, who were higher class white women who had arrangements with individual men for the long term. Danielle Jeanine Cole highlights the threat poor white prostitutes posed to white supremacy’s construct of white womanhood, which was based on middle-class women. Cole argues that much of the wartime feeling of crisis was fuelled by the increased visibility of poor white prostitutes who’s very existence undermined white supremacist constructs of white women as inherently pure and morally superior to Black women, blurring “the distinctions between the reputable and the disreputable.” Cole, “Public Women, Public Space,” 2.

²⁷ Krowl, “African American Women and the United States Military,” 187; Cole, “Public Women, Public Space,” 11; Marcia Colton to George Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, June 14, 1864, AMAA.

and the ways in which women could simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time are considered. It also meant that engaging in prostitution in Norfolk, could result in re-captivity and containment rather than expanded economic freedom. The Union's racialized policy raised the stakes for Black women, making prostitution an even less viable pathway to freedom. Containment of Black women appeared to be the Union's primary goal. The creation of the island prison limited the movements of Black women and thus their interactions with the army, a priority over and above their reformation.

Further, the women were given no opportunities for self-improvement or work. Colton described the "Magdalen Camp" as a "barren land" upon which "you would not grow a carrot." She suggested that the island was never really used for farming, but what "little soil there was there" had been "shoveled up" by the Confederates for "their entrenchments."²⁸ In other locations like Nashville and Port Royal, women were encouraged to work the fields of abandoned plantations, rearing crops for themselves and market. They could also work as laundresses, cooks, and domestics to the many Mission Houses. The women held on Craney Island were cut off from such opportunities.²⁹

Colton's installment as a missionary was unique among her counterparts in Norfolk, most of whom ran schools. Colton did not. By October she explained that she had not "been able to

²⁸ Colton to Whipple, May 19, 1864, AMAA. to

²⁹ Comparatively, the Magdalene Society of Philadelphia ensured that the women were on a schedule of learning that would equip them for domestic life. While they were not given skills to work, they were able to learn how to read and were placed with a suitable family where they were to contribute the female virtues of piety and domestic industry to the household. While both Magdalen locations were sites of containment, the camp did not pursue any program of improvement for the Black inmates. Additionally, the argument that work was available elsewhere is not to suggest that there were not questionable practices pertaining to Black women's labor in Union occupied locations, including little or no pay. Each of these work options came with their own drawbacks, as well as paternalism of white missionaries and soldiers who remarked upon their willingness to work, their efficiency, and degrees of laziness. These conditions are revealed extensively in the letters of Port Royal missionaries published in Elizabeth Ware (ed), *Letters from Port Royal, 1862-1868*, (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969); Teeters, "The Early Days of the Magdalen Society," 162.

spend much time instructing them,” and that she believed they “were not disposed to listen much to instruction.” Being the only missionary on the island, it is clear that no schools were organized for the imprisoned women. With neither work nor opportunities for education, reforming these women by opening other options for them to obtain an income and improve their prospects was not the intent behind the Magdalen Camp. It is unsurprising, then, that Colton reported that those who had served their sentences often ended up arrested and returned to the island very quickly. She lamented that they went “right back to their old haunts,” which were the only places they knew they could make enough money to ensure their survival.

The Union’s objective of surveillance is further evidenced by the General Order issued in summer 1864. In July 1864, Captain Orlando Brown announced that the women residing on Craney Island “must all stay here through the summer even if their sentence does expire.” Although Colton does not explain the reason for the military’s decision, she reiterates that “those who have gone when their sentence was out have gone right back” to prostitution and are arrested again. It is possible that the military preferred to surveil them on the island rather than waste time and military resources making repeated arrests. Colton appeared to be concerned that the women’s return to prostitution would reflect poorly on her capabilities and so asked for the new policy to be made a general order. She believed that extended time with them would help her “manage them better.” But for the women, this was devastating news. The policy applied to all the imprisoned women, regardless of how much time was left in their sentence. Not surprisingly, they were angry, becoming “boisterous and rough.”³⁰

The imprisoned women faced moral appraisal under the gaze of Marcia Colton. She wrote of the “moral authorities” belief in the necessity of the prison. Based on the rest of her

³⁰ Marcia Colton to George Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, July 9, 1864, AMAA.

letter one can surmise that she saw herself, alongside Professor William Woodbury, his wife, and “other members of the mission,” as said moral authorities. The Woodburys and other missionaries agreed that she “had better try,” to “reform” the Magdalen women.³¹ Her later letters reveal her belief not only in her moral superiority on the basis of her religiosity but also in her racial superiority. In three separate letters to Whipple, Colton expressed the necessity for there to be “a white woman here on the island as long as there are prisoners here... to prevent real heathenish practice.”³² She later assured Whipple that she had “illustration of this” heathenishness and went on to describe a Sunday morning during which “some of the girls were running around the grounds entirely destitute of clothing.” Colton knew that the reason the women had taken off their clothes was that the fireplace in their house had made their room too hot. Yet she scolded them and used the incident as a demonstration of their “heathenish” tendencies, a racialized trope she believed fit the women no matter the context.³³

Colton’s views of the women were so deeply racialized that her letters were not filled with accounts of her interactions with them, but rather with further judgments of their moral depravity. Although she claimed to “look upon the American African with more charity,” she also had “less expectation than many others,” of their moral and mental capabilities. Colton believed it was unreasonable to expect much of them in the realm of “propriety, or chastity,” because their white masters had been a poor example for them, being those who laid “aside their manhood for mere animal gratification,” then sold “their own children into bondage.”³⁴

Further, Colton shared that her time amongst the women proved that “those poor degraded freedwomen have clinging to them the Heathenism of Africa.” This was no surprise to

³¹ Colton to Whipple, May 19, 1864, AMAA.

³² Marcia Colton to George Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, January 8, 1865, AMAA.

³³ Marcia Colton to George Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, November 8, 1864, AMAA.

³⁴ Colton to Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, June 14, 1864, AMAA.

her and was the only thing that made sense of “this predominance of animal habits” apparent in most of them.³⁵ Between the stewardship of their white masters and their ancestry, the women on the island, and, consequently, all the contraband men and women, could not be expected to be virtuous. To her, these women had a biological inheritance of depravity that was fortified by enslavement, making them passively brutalized animals that needed to be “tamed” by white paternalism. At best, Black women were guilty victims that could only find improvement through white influence.

Colton was far from alone in these views of Black women. Hers were a product of white northern abolitionism’s fascination with “the erotic South” and longstanding racialization of Black women.³⁶ As Carol Lasser highlights, abolitionist pamphleteers of the 1830s often “sought to mobilize northern women to work against the institution of slavery” by calling them to “behold the great and wicked abominations that they do in the slave plantations.”³⁷ In abolitionist George Bourne’s *Slavery Illustrated in its Effects Upon Women and Domestic Society*, “graphic depictions of the sexual horrors of slavery” were circulated throughout abolitionist circles. He described the South as “one vast brothel in which multiform incest, polygamy, adultery” existed, with the hopes of winning white Northern support for abolition.³⁸

However, these ideas did not stand alone, rather, they were intermingled with ideas about the hypersexuality of Black women. Deborah Gray White highlights the ways in which enslaved women’s “chattel status, sex, and race” worked together to “create a complex set of myths about black womanhood.” The most prevalent trope that dominated white Americans’

³⁵ Colton to Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, November 1, 1864, AMA.

³⁶ Ronald Walters, “The Erotic South: Civilization and Sexuality in American Abolitionism,” *American Quarterly* 25 (May 1973), 177-201.

³⁷ Carol Lasser, “Voyeuristic Abolitionism: Sex, Gender, and the Transformation of Antislavery Rhetoric,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 28 (Spring 2008), 85.

³⁸ George Bourne, *Slavery Illustrated in its Effects Upon Women and Domestic Society* (Boston, MA, 1837), vii in *ibid.*

view of Black women was that of the “Jezabel,” the woman “governed almost entirely by her libido,” the opposite of the ideal Victorian lady. Rather than being a pious force in the family structure (like white women were), Black women were “sensual beings,” promiscuous, and sexually powerful. They could “render the men callous to all the finer sensations of love and female excellence.”³⁹ These ideations allowed Colton to vilify slave masters and simultaneously believe in the depravity of enslaved women. To Colton, it was these realities that forced God to take “the work into his own hands,” since the North had turned a blind eye to the “adulterers and fornicators... sabbath breaking drunkenness and profanity...”⁴⁰ In a conversation between Colton and Mrs. James, the wife of Horace James, the Superintendent of the Freedmen of Roanoke Island in North Carolina, the joining of these two ideologies is evident. Mrs. James visited Craney Island in September 1864, where Colton shared her discouragement regarding her seemingly lacking ability to reform the Magdalen women. James encouraged Colton in her efforts by assuring her that “four fifths of them seemed to have no power to resist temptations to sin, particularly the violations of laws of chastity and virtue.”⁴¹

These notions of Black immorality and incompetence meant that Black women were not simply restricted in their ability to build freedom, they were also exposed to further harm, including re-enslavement and sexual violence. For example, the Union made Colton responsible for housing the women who were freed from the Magdalen Camp, an effort to prevent them from returning to prostitution. She describes having limited options, choosing to return “some girls to their Mothers,” but also returned one woman to “the family that once owned her.” Upon seeing Colton and their enslaved property, the family promised both women that “if she would go back

³⁹ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, (New York: Q.Q. Norton, 1985), 28-30.

⁴⁰ Colton to Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, June 14, 1864.

⁴¹ Marcia Colton to George Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, September 1864, AMAA.

and be a good girl that she had used to be, that she should never want for anything in sickness or health.” Colton was convinced by the enslavers’ “tearful earnestness” that the freedwoman would “have a good home.” Her allusion to the marriage vows is notable upon the woman’s re-enslavement. This rhetorical choice illustrates her belief that the woman could only be restrained from her natural promiscuity through some ordained covenant that would keep her bound; the covenant of slave ownership.⁴² Although Colton claimed that imagining the “scenes” of slavery “enacted every day in Virginia and elsewhere in Slave Territory” made her “heart sink,” her actions demonstrate that she believed in its ability to “tame” Black women in a way that freedom could not.

Colton’s conviction about their innate promiscuity left Black women unprotected from sexual violence. Trying to explain their “animal habits,” Colton stated that the women “think they can make” the Union soldiers “stoop to their gratification, just the same here as elsewhere.” One sergeant and six privates served as the guard on Craney Island, and, according to what she had seen, “every where these Females come into contact with the army” they take, “just as much opportunity to indulge their sensual propensities as they wish.”⁴³ Only a month prior, Colton had lamented that the “sin of soddom” was “so common in our army,” yet she expected more from the guards at Craney Island. According to her, unlike the women who sought to seduce them, “the present Guard have conducted themselves with propriety, so far as the Prisoners are concerned.”⁴⁴ Her perception of the guard as virtuous and the women as seductresses trying to degrade good northern white men allowed her to condemn the women for running around naked, rather than exhibiting concern for their safety from sexual violence.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Colton to Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, June 14, 1864; Colton to Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, November 1, 1864.

⁴⁴ Marcia Colton to George Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, October 7, 1864, AMAA; *ibid.*

Despite these impressions, Colton learned her assumptions were inaccurate. The same letter in which she accused the women of attempting to entice the soldiers, featured her admission that the women told her the guard had “indulged themselves disgracefully” with them. Colton approached Captain Brown to discuss the violation the women had reported, but he asked her to leave it alone as he “wished to keep the concern in his own hands.” Not only did Brown resist her intervention, but he also dismissed her concerns, telling her that “the women would tell lies on the guard, and on each other,” so she “must not believe them without other proof.”⁴⁵ This dismissal from Captain Brown, who went on to become Assistant Commissioner for the Freedmen’s Bureau in Virginia, reveals the impact of the Jezebel trope on preventing white men from seeing Black women’s victimhood. He painted them as untrustworthy women with a propensity to lie, halting any further investigation. The women had been on the island for a month before Colton arrived, being guarded by men who sexually abused them on some occasions, and other times, paid for their bodies when “payday came,” a day that brought “whiskey and all its train of evils.”⁴⁶

Captain Brown’s disinterest did not dissuade Colton, who was convinced of the depravity taking place on the island after witnessing a “payday” for herself. To combat the issue, she decided to keep a close watch on any men who came onto the island, including those who came to build a hospital. After the guard was changed, she noticed that “the prisoners at once commenced with the new Guard,” suggesting, again, that it was the women who sought to create a microcosm of their clientele on the island. “Determined to make [herself] a terror to Evildoers,” Colton reported the crimes to the Department but was met with another Captain who simply “blamed the men for telling tales” on one another, exhibiting no concern for the women.

⁴⁵ Colton to Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, November 1, 1864.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Colton's letter explaining these incidents suggests that a mixture of sexual violence and a continuation of the sex trade were occurring on Craney Island. The vulnerability of the imprisoned women to sexual violence by their guards illuminates the lack of safety Black women had while they pursued freedom through means the Union made illegal, including prostitution. Unlike the impulse to protect the construct of white womanhood (which underpinned the racialized laws), the Union's decision to imprison them and make little effort to ensure the women were not sexually assaulted, demonstrates the impulse to perpetuate Black women's sexual subjugation in freedom. Union officials depended upon age-old tropes of Black women's untrustworthiness and promiscuity to deny them protection. The military only concerned themselves with denying Black women the right to leave the island, not with what happened to them while they were on it.

Simultaneously, Colton's descriptions of "payday" also seem to indicate that some of the women on the island sought to continue their trade while in the prison. Considering the lack of opportunity to earn any money or learn any new skills, alongside the rate at which many of them ended up back on the island, it is unsurprising that they would seek to secure some financial gains for themselves. Whether on the island, in Norfolk, or other Union occupied locations, the presence of Union soldiers meant that these women always had opportunities to earn money through sex work. They understood that they had to secure everything from food to a roof over their heads to have a chance to build their free lives.

Those imprisoned on Craney Island had these additional constraints whilst coping with the same challenges plaguing those in contraband camps. For example, the women on the island lacked adequate clothing, just as they did elsewhere. Colton planned to make their clothes from

old Union tents.⁴⁷ Black women in Norfolk and elsewhere all demonstrated a desire to pay for clothing they received from missionaries, preferring that dignity over charity, and there is no reason to assume the women on Craney Island did not hold those same desires. Thus, even while in prison, the Magdalen women pursued economic freedom to ensure they could build freedom and move through their free lives with the dignity they long desired.

Colton believed her race and gender enforced moral control and offered a degree of protection from sexual violence. She told a correspondent that white women were a necessity on the island, for they provided Black women “bodily comfort,” against sexual violence. Colton’s ability to deter such violence and to exert some moral control over the soldiers on the island was not entirely imagined. The Victorian cult of true womanhood that depicted white women as agents of piety in their homes and thus broader society provided white women with a shield against the sexually graphic and explicit. Carol Lasser, argues that before the Civil War, ideas of “gendered respectability” took shape in American society forcing the once fashionable discussions around sexual violence in abolitionism to be pushed to the margins because such themes were considered too vulgar for women to be exposed to.⁴⁸ These ideas shaped Northern social norms which remained a specter over Union occupied locations though these women were far from home.

The tenure of Marcia Colton as a missionary to the women of the “Magdalen Camp” illuminates the risk Black women incurred by pursuing economic freedoms behind Union lines, especially by engaging with the sex trade. While Union occupation in Virginia allowed them to remain there, being in the custody of the Union did not free them from the ideologies of racial hierarchy that informed their sexual subjugation. The words of the women themselves are

⁴⁷ Colton to Whipple, Craney Island, Virginia, January 8, 1865.

⁴⁸ Lasser, “Voyeuristic Abolitionism,” 104.

completely absent from Colton’s writings, yet her self-centered storytelling makes clear the maze that had to be navigated by formerly enslaved women seeking freedom.

* * *

Unlike Norfolk, Virginia, Union occupation in Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee, made prostitution a more viable pathway for Black women to pursue freedom, at least for a short window of time. Prostitution in Nashville and Memphis had been a hallmark of these Southern urban centers. Union occupation simply made the trade more visible. The cities had already demonstrated a willingness to tolerate the existence of the trade before the war, as a “sanitary measure.” In 1861, Memphis aldermen attempted to pass an ordinance that would “station in the vicinity of each bawdy house a policeman, whose wages were to be paid by the proprietor.” While the writer believed the board of Aldermen sought to protect “these unfortunate women... from outrages,” in effect, the ordinance was an attempt to levy a tax on brothel owners. Bearing the cost of the surveillance that they required to maintain order, over what was considered a “common nuisance,” the ordinance appeared to be reasonable. Nonetheless, the effort failed spectacularly with brothel owners refusing to pay the tax.⁴⁹ Similarly, in Nashville, a bill was placed before the Board of Aldermen “for the amelioration of the evils of prostitution in the city.” The bill proposed frequent “police regulation,” aimed to achieve “the suppression of vagrancy, and the assemblage of the disorderly and abandoned young females in the more respectable localities of the city,” a provision the author believed was long overdue.⁵⁰ The bill did not seek to regulate brothels; rather, it sought to limit the movement of sex workers

⁴⁹ *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, August 13, 1861, accessed via newspapers.com, September 2021.

⁵⁰ *The Tennessean*, April 10, 1861, accessed via newspapers.com, September 2021.

themselves to specific areas, to keep the trade out of public view. In Nashville, “houses of ill fame” were limited to several blocks in the heart of the city, which became known as “Smoky Row,” a region that was renowned long before the Civil War.⁵¹

Thus, the Civil War did not initiate the sex trade, but, rather, fanned its well-kindled flames. By the occupation of Nashville and Memphis in 1862, their reputations for prostitution were broadly known and discussed by soldiers and inhabitants. In June 1862, one newspaper reported on sex workers who could be seen roaming around Memphis. He described them as “often young and comely, and... expensively dressed, though frequently with sober and excellent taste.” He went on to describe them as women “rarely bound by political creeds or formulas. They [were] universal,” suggesting their clientele were a mixture of both Union and Confederate sympathizers, and even Union officials and local congressmen.⁵² By the close of the war, a correspondent wrote of Nashville that it exhibited “more inducements for, drinking, gaming, prostitution, than any city of its size and capacity on the continent.”⁵³ The availability of sex had become one of the key features of the city throughout the Civil War, and those who supplied it were a mixture of poor white women, and Black former slaves, and Black free women.

Black women fleeing enslavement arrived in both Nashville and Memphis looking to build free lives. Yet, in these cities, just like elsewhere, the decisions of the Union army fundamentally shaped the trajectory for Black women’s freedom building efforts, particularly as pertained to earning money. To understand what happened to Black women who worked as prostitutes in Nashville and Memphis, the context of Union law is important. As outlined in

⁵¹ Cole, “Public Women, Public Spaces,” 2.

⁵² Prior to the Civil War the sex trade’s profitability came in seasonal waves. When Congress was in session proved to be one of the most lucrative seasons for prostitutes and brothel owners in Nashville, Tennessee. The city was filled with men away from home on business for weeks at a time, who, much like the soldiers away from home, sought the company of “fancy women;” *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, June 25, 1862, accessed via newspapers.com, September 2021; Cole, “Public Women, Public Spaces,” 8.

⁵³ *Nashville Daily Telegraph*, August 22, 1865.

chapter one, the Union sought to dam the flood of Black women entering Union lines by sending those from nearby plantations back to their masters, and forcing others to fend for themselves on plots of abandoned Confederate land. Military Governor, Andrew Johnson, petitioned Congress to void the Emancipation Proclamation in Nashville. He refused to create contraband camps for the thousands of runaways entering the city, arguing that doing so would “attract the dross.”⁵⁴ Despite Johnson’s efforts to dissuade enslaved people from coming to Nashville, and the Union’s efforts to expel Black women from behind Union lines, they still came. Black men and women demanded freedom by arriving in numbers that forced the Union to account for their presence.

While Black women successfully penetrated Union lines, the Union made it even more difficult for them to earn money using General Order No.6. The order, issued in January 1863, by General Rosecrans, came shortly after the Emancipation Proclamation which had caused a spike in arrivals of formerly enslaved refugees to Nashville. The order permitted the employment of Black men, both enslaved and free by the Union. The order allowed Black women to work as “cooks, nurses, and attendants in hospitals,” but simultaneously issued a warning against hiring Black women, advising that the “commanding general enjoins great caution in the employment of [Black] women in any case where it might lead to immorality.”⁵⁵ This caveat, though phrased to apply only to women who “might” provoke immorality, could be employed however a Union officer saw fit; allowing them to discriminate against any Black woman they perceived to be sexually predatory or tempting. This order leaned on the long-standing view of Black women as hypersexualized and biologically predisposed to promiscuity. This meant white soldiers were

⁵⁴ Andrew Johnson, “The Condition of the Negroes, Nashville, Tennessee, November 23, 1863”, *Andrew Johnson Papers*, Vol.6, 488

⁵⁵ General Order No. 6, *O.R.* 2:23:1:20

likely to see the potential for “immorality” in all Black women they encountered, further narrowing their path to employment.

Ironically, the hypersexualized view of Black women closed the door on getting work and opened the door to the sex trade and relationships of sexual favors wide. In 1863, Joseph McKee, a white missionary, wrote to Andrew Johnson on the topic. Asking Johnson to open official contraband camps in Nashville, the missionary lamented the “suffering... [of] their present condition,” due to a lack of shelter and food for the newly freed people. As a result of Johnson’s negligence, Black women were left uniquely vulnerable. He alerted Johnson to the options Black women faced:

It is known that in many cases, criminal connections are formed between the younger females & soldiers of the Federal army, who in many cases, have decoyed them from their former homes and are now living in more or less intimate relations with them to the literal demoralization of both and the military demoralization of the latter. This fact can be well attested, if any doubt remains.⁵⁶

According to McKee, either young Black women sought to expand their options by using their sexuality, or white men were coercing them into these “criminal connections.” While it is impossible to know which occurred without the testimony of the women themselves, it is reasonable to assume that both took place. For women, sex was a commodity they could use whenever they deemed necessary, even without explicitly entering the world of brothels and streetwalkers. Black women understood that pairing up with Union soldiers could be their ticket North. Where this occurred, it is clear that Black women saw selling their bodies as a possibly temporary requirement for potentially long-lasting freedom away from the remnants of the slave

⁵⁶ Joseph G. McKee and M.M Brown to Andrew Johnson, November 3, 1863. *Andrew Johnson Papers*, Vol 5, p.451,

regime. Contrastingly, the possibility that white soldiers were falsely promising Black women passage North in exchange for sex, is equally likely. Given the sense of entitlement to sex with Black women and their distance from home, making temporary connections with Black women for sexual gratification, by whatever means they could, likely occurred often.

In either case, Johnson denied the Reverend's request to form contraband camps and did not comment upon, or seek to protect, these women from such connections. While instances of rape could become court-martial cases, these more nuanced experiences of sexual exploitation were not, and perhaps could not be, teased out by Union military law. Thus, much like in the condition of enslavement, Black women could face sexual exploitation by white men with no legal recourse or defense. Johnson's lack of concern for the vulnerability of Black women is an expected consequence of his commitment to the Southern order in which the sexual violence perpetrated was known but ignored. Black women's pursuit of, or desire for, sexual dignity was not a concern of the state, even where they were thoroughly surveilled.

The Union's efforts to curb prostitution in Nashville and Memphis further illuminates the presence of white men's entitlement to Black women's bodies. Union occupation of the two cities brought hundreds of soldiers. Besides laboring to build fortifications-which they mostly impressed contraband and enslaved men for- they were relatively inactive. Where there was a plethora of soldiers, historian James Boyd Jones argues, "it was nearly axiomatic that prostitutes would collect as well".⁵⁷ Indeed, by the summer of 1863, one newspaper estimated approximately six hundred white prostitutes were in the city.⁵⁸ The industry of sex work thrived

⁵⁷ James Boyd Jones Jr., "A Tale of Two Cities: The Hidden Battle Against Venereal Disease in Civil War Nashville and Memphis", *Civil War History* vol.31, No.3, (1985), 270.

⁵⁸ Nashville *Dispatch*, July 9, 1863, in Jeanine Cole, "Upon a Stage of Disorder: Legalized Prostitution in Memphis and Nashville, 1863-1865", *THS*, Vol.68, No.1, (Spring 2009), p.45

in the city. The streets of Nashville, “Smokey Row,” were lined with brothels. An Ohioan soldier stationed in Nashville recalled comrade’s declaration that “Nashville beats all for bad women,” despite having been to the notorious brothels of New York. The soldier told his wife he was baffled and repulsed by the ubiquity of prostitutes, explaining that in the evening, “they just swarm around the houses in that portion of the city like rats. Every house is a house of ill fame... and they are the ruination of a number of soldiers.”⁵⁹ The sustained interaction between soldiers and prostitutes reaped both violence and a consequent rise in venereal disease- a medical crisis which the Union struggled to handle. Violence was resolved somewhat simply by arrests of both soldiers and “bawdy women,” but the venereal crisis required a more systematic and comprehensive solution.

The spread of sexually transmitted diseases was unstoppable, and by June 1863, regimental commanders and surgeons implored Provost Marshall Spalding to rid “the city of the diseased prostitutes infesting it”, that soldiers might be saved “from a fate worse... than to perish on the battlefield.”⁵⁰ And so was born the first effort to control the problem: the expulsion of Nashville’s prostitute population. On July 6, 1863, all white prostitutes were expelled from the city. Some attempted to marry soldiers to prevent their expulsion, but most were crowded onto four steamboats- one of which was named the *Idaho*.⁶⁰ The boatloads of white women traveled up to Louisville, Kentucky, where they were refused to land. They continued to Cincinnati, where they were also refused. They eventually returned to Nashville by August 1863.⁶¹

⁵⁹ John W. Baldwin to his wife, September 26, 1862. In Walter Durham, *Reluctant Partners*, p.47.

⁵⁰ United States Surgeon General’s Office, *The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*, vol.1. pt.3, ed. Charles Smart, cited in Jones Jr, “A Tale of Two Cities”, p. 272.

⁶⁰ Durham, *Reluctant Partners*, p.46.

⁶¹ *ibid*

Thus, the problem of prostitution remained. Provost Marshal Spalding's second attempt to resolve the issue was unconventional but more successful: he instituted a licensing system for prostitutes. To gain a license to practice, each woman had to provide her address, receive weekly medical examinations where a certificate of health would be issued to those who were well, and any woman who was infected was transferred to the hospital that was opened specifically to house and treat prostitutes with venereal diseases. Women found "plying their vocation without a license and health certificate" would be "incarcerated in the workhouse for... thirty days."⁶²

While the eventual legalization of prostitution was a unique and unexpected way of dealing with the spike in venereal disease that came as a result of the heightened trade, the racialization of the policies illuminates the Union's dependence upon a traditional racialized gender ideology. Only white women were expelled from Nashville, leaving Black sex workers behind to serve the still present clientele, but when the licensing policy was instituted, it was open exclusively to white women. It was not until the following spring when doctors showed that venereal disease had continued to spread, that the Union reluctantly opened the licensing to Black prostitutes.

Black women's eventual inclusion in the licensing system did reap some benefits, however short lived they were. On the first day that licensing was available to Black women over 50 showed up to submit themselves to the military protocol. Unlike the women left vulnerable on Craney Island, the women of Nashville experienced a degree of protection by Union officials. For example, after Black women at Hospital 15, complained to Dr. Chambers about receiving threats from men, he requested "that a guard of two men be detailed to protect the persons and property of colored prostitutes."⁶³ How those guards conducted themselves is unknown, but the

⁶² Smart (ed), *Medical and Surgical History*, 893, Jones Jr., "Tale of Two Cities", p. 273.

⁶³ Cole, "Public Women, Public Space," 15.

protection of their “persons and property,” was much more than what was offered before licenses were legal. This safety made engaging in the Nashville and Memphis sex trades a much more viable option for Black women in 1864 until legalization was repealed at the close of the war.

In another case, the benefits are a little harder to read. In the fall of 1863, a Black woman named Mary Alloway, an alleged brothel owner, managed to win a court case brought against her by two Black men. The men sued Alloway for expelling them from the rooms they rented from her, breaking the rental agreement, to use the house “for the purposes of prostitution.” In their place, Alloway had allegedly “let in some lewd white women (notorious prostitutes) because they will pay higher rent.” The case reached the desk of Andrew Johnson because the two men were contraband, wards of the state, who had been instructed by the military office to live there “until further orders.” Alloway was being sued for breach of contract, and according to the *Nashville Dispatch*, she was also being sued for “keeping a bawdy house.”⁶⁴ A judge ruled in favor of Alloway, a surprising outcome considering her business and the fact military authorities had placed the two black men in her house. Yet, Alloway was simultaneously charged with “keeping a bawdy house,” likely a result of some violence that occurred in or outside it.⁶⁵ At this point the licensing system did not apply to Black women, so, it is possible Alloway was enjoying the legal protection that had been extended to the white women who were boarding with her, whilst simultaneously being made liable for the consequences of whatever chaos came as a result of their legalized trade.

⁶⁴ James Trimble to Andrew Johnson, September 2, 1863, Nashville, Tennessee, in *Andrew Johnson Papers*, 352-353.

⁶⁵ Jeanine Cole highlights that most cases regarding the keeping of “bawdy houses,” came as a result of an instance of violence happening inside or on the streets around the brothels, rather than for their existence. Cole, “Public Spaces, Public Women,” 8.

Several historians have examined this unique historical moment, though none explore the racialization that shaped the initial policy. James Boyd Jones embraced the Union perspective on the issue, exploring the policy as a response to a medical crisis that threatened military strength and success. He charts the experimental journey of the licensing system from Nashville to Memphis, Chattanooga to Knoxville.⁶⁶ Walter Durham also explores the rise in prostitution and the Union efforts to manage it, arguing that the presence of prostitutes was a key feature of occupied Nashville. He highlights the “struggle to control” the prostitutes as a tension in the social fabric of occupied Nashville, with conflicting priorities guiding the Union officials and the women working as prostitutes.⁵⁷

More recently historian Danielle Jeannine Cole conducted a gendered study of prostitution in Civil War Tennessee, tracing the *Idaho*’s journey to Kentucky and back. Cole argues that “public women” posed a threat to the social system and interprets the initial expulsion efforts as an attempt to “purify Nashville’s public space.”⁶⁷ However, none of these historians offer an interpretation of the narrative as pertained to Black women, whose experiences are hidden by their exclusion from Union policy. Jones Jr. does not attempt to explain Black women being excluded, and Durham merely prefaces his sentence on their exclusion with the phrase, “for no good reason.”⁶⁸ Cole tentatively suggests that black women may have not been expelled because Provost Marshal Spalding “realized that his deportation scheme was an utter failure,” an unsubstantiated and unlikely conclusion.⁶⁹ The exceptional circumstances that unfolded in

⁶⁶ James Boyd Jones Jr. explores prostitution in several articles: “Tale of Two Cities”; “Municipal Vice... pt. I”; “Municipal Vice: The Management of Prostitution in Tennessee’s Urban Experience. The Examples of Chattanooga and Knoxville, 1838-1917”, *THQ*, Vol. 50, No.2, (Summer 1991), pp. 110-122; *Hidden History of Civil War Tennessee*, (Charleston: The Historical Press, 2013); Durham, *Nashville*, p.184 Durham, *Reluctant Partners*, p.112-113.

⁶⁷ Jeanine Cole, “Upon the Stage of Disorder”, p. 47.

⁶⁸ Durham, *Reluctant Partners*, p. 46.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p.45.

Nashville have demanded historians' attention whilst the exclusion of Black women from the policies has obfuscated their place in the narrative. The equally significant story of black women in this becomes clear in the analysis of the public reaction to Black women being permitted to remain in the city, and the results of the licensing system.

The exclusion of Black women from both the expulsion efforts and licensing system, that initially left Black women in the sex trade unprotected, was undoubtedly intentional on the part of the Union army. Black women were known to engage in prostitution in the city, and the Union's decision not to expel them provoked vehement objections from white inhabitants. An article in the Nashville *Daily Press* demanded the removal of all Black prostitutes. "So barefaced are these black prostitutes becoming," the writer lamented, "that they parade the streets, even the public squares by day and night."⁷⁰ The problem was the pride and openness with which these Black women engaged as the "guilty sex." Their engagement in prostitution was not a circumstantial plight, rather it was "the aggravated curse of lechery among the Negresses," which the authorities were obligated "to eradicate" not encourage.⁷¹ The objection to prostitution, in general, had been its "demoralizing" effect upon the health and military capabilities of white soldiers, however, the revulsion to Black prostitutes was built upon notions of the depravity of black female sexuality. Their presence and public engagement in sexual labor, therefore, threatened to make "our fair city a Gomorrah."⁷²

The Union officials ignored this objection, not because they disagreed with this characterization of Black women, but likely because they agreed with it. After all, the licensing system was initially available only to white women. Dr. William Chambers, the doctor assigned

⁷⁰ Nashville *Daily Press*, July 9, 1863, in Jeanine Cole, "'Upon the Stage of Disorder", p.45.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

to work at Hospital 15, opened specifically for women with venereal disease, noted that the licensing system improved the condition of white prostitutes already in Nashville, by allowing them to charge higher rates. It gave their occupation legitimacy, and, as a consequence, drew more white women to the capital “from northern cities [because of] the comparative protection from venereal disease which the license system afforded.”⁷³ Further, Chambers recorded that in the initial months of inspection, the women “were exceedingly filthy in their persons and apparel and obscene and coarse in their language.” However, within a short time, this “soon gave place to cleanliness and propriety.” Chambers declared the licensing system a success, describing the “civilizing” effect it had upon the women.⁷⁴ Cole argues that this improvement in the condition and behavior of white prostitutes was perhaps the result of a “developing quasi-professional pride,” as the licensing system moved their trade from the underworld of illicit activity, into the public sphere.

The Union’s seeming indifference to the presence of Black prostitutes in the city, and the exclusion of Black women from the licensing system were intentional and telling. It reflected ideas about interracial sex and Black women’s place in society. As Joseph McKee noted, interracial sex and relationships between Black women and Federal soldiers was common. Some soldiers went to black prostitutes because they were cheaper, whilst others sought them out as a novelty or curiosity. Either way, the existence of these pairings was known. Black prostitutes, until crisis dictated, were “allowed” to engage in sexual relations with white men, as long as it was covert and remained illicit. The issue, then, was not interracial sex, but the overt, non-illicit legitimization of interracial sex. Black women being sexually exploited was a normative part of

⁷³ Jones Jr. “A Tale of Two Cities”, p.274.

⁷⁴ Smart, *Medical and Surgical History*, 894, in Jones Jr. “A Tale of Two Cities”, p. 274.

the southern social order. The actions of Union officials perpetuated this tradition and unveiled the national ideology that deemed this exploitation permissible if private.

Throughout the antebellum era, proslavery advocates outlined white fears of interracial sex and amalgamation, epitomized by the most famous print, “The Amalgamation Waltz” by artist Edward W. Clay. In a four-part series called *Practical Amalgamation* (1839), the images of racial mixing were set entirely in spaces that white supremacy had reserved for upper-class white men and women: a musical soiree, a ball, a wedding, and a parlor. The racial mixing depicted in these anti-abolitionist prints is entirely of white women with black men, with depictions of Black women only featured in the final sketch as an opera singer and audience members at the musical soiree. Depictions of elevated Black women engaging in sexual relationships with white men are entirely absent from the series. This absence is comparable to the absence of action to expel black prostitutes or license them, as it denies the respectability of sexual relations with Black women and any potential for the respectability of Black female sexuality. Traditionally, African American women had been exploited by white men who owned them, thus, elevating this interaction in any way undermined the white supremacist and patriarchal imaginary, which depended upon the exclusion of Black women from its constructs of womanhood.

Jeanine Cole argues that the main objection to prostitution that arose across the Civil War South, was not its mere existence but the threat it posed to the white middle-class ideology of white womanhood. Not only did prostitution threaten patriarchal ideas of the innate piety and chastity of white women, but it also undermined their social position as rightful dependents by offering them economic independence and embroiling them in violence from which women to be protected. Cole argues that during the Civil War, prostitutes “stepped out of the shadows and into the limelight of the public sphere,” a move that “blurred the distinctions of the reputable and the

disreputable.”⁷⁵ While the reality of white prostitutes threatened patriarchy, the presence of Black prostitutes, operating with the same license, threatened this same construct differently.

To license Black sex workers alongside their white counterparts, would be to create a social space that both Black women and white women occupied as public, and, thus, visible equals. This would erode the established hierarchy that placed white women as morally and sexually superior to Black women, by elevating Black women and denigrating white women. This is evidenced by the lack of newspaper complaints about Black women being excluded from the licensing system, like there were about the Union’s failure to expel those same women only months before.

White people, both northern and southern, feared the elevation of Black women throughout the Civil War. Paul Escott highlights that the term miscegenation was a new term during the Civil War, “created as a weapon for Democrats” in the spring of 1864. While some abolitionists celebrated the monumental Emancipation Proclamation, with Wendell Phillips even declaring Black women to be “the new type of American female,” the Democrats used the perceived threat interracial sex posed to the social order as a political tactic to undermine the Republican Party. A seventy-two-page pamphlet published and disseminated by northern Democrats in 1864 was titled, *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro*. The pamphlet “took the deepest racial and sexual fears and presented them as the earnest beliefs and recommendations of abolitionists,” in a bid to transform the public interpretation Republican platform into one that prized what “a majority of whites viewed as perfidious, disgusting, racial goals.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 82; Cole, “Public Women in Public Spaces, 1-2.

⁷⁶ Paul D. Escott, *The Worst Passions of Human Nature: White Supremacy in the Civil War North*, (Charlottesville: University Virginia Press, 2020), 153-155.

Democrats claimed the deployment of white women to Port Royal as teachers and missionaries as evidence of Lincoln and the Republicans' promotion of racial mixing.⁷⁷ This is a clear example of Martha Hodes' argument that concern surrounding specifically white women pairing with Black men did spike during and after the Civil War. However, the newspapers recount a heightened concern over Black women, prostitutes, and free women, being elevated and in sexual relationships with white men. One clear depiction of this concern was the theatre run of a minstrel show in Nashville, in 1862, called *Poor oppressed, or The Contraband schottisch*, by composer E. A. Benson.



Figure 2.1: The Cover of E.A. Benson's Minstrel Show: *Poor oppressed, or The Contraband schottisch* (Library of Congress)

⁷⁷ Ibid, 156.

The poster and cover for the minstrel show depicts a Black woman dressed like a middle-class white woman. While the concept of African American women dressed as such was the source of mockery and ridicule in the genre of minstrelsy, it also demonstrated a fear of the disruption of the social order. Minstrel shows notoriously showed Black women as hypersexual and characters of ridicule, but depictions such as these ridiculed the notion of respectable Black womanhood, implying that they never could participate in white constructs of womanhood, or have their sexuality respected or protected. Further, while minstrel shows taunted blackness, they demonstrated a covert interest in and curiosity about Black women's bodies. As Eric Lott argues, minstrelsy was not simply about "absolute white power," but rather it was a mixture of "cross-racial desire... insupportable fascination and self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices," that made it about "panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure."⁷⁸

Nashville and Memphis newspapers throughout the war illuminate the fascination, and fear, that surrounded the elevation of black women and their involvement with white men. Month after month, and consistently throughout the four years of war, newspapers reported on cases where white men were seen in public with Black women. In the summer of 1862, the *Memphis Avalanche* reported that Memphians had seen a "white man, dressed in the uniform of a Federal marine... walking down Main street with two negro women on his arms." The "novel" trio attracted the attention of passersby, "citizens and police officers," as they strolled down to Beale Street, who began to pursue them for their public crime, calling out "shoot him," "hang him." One of the women seems to have gotten away, while the man and his other companion were arrested. He was taken to the Provost Marshal, while she was taken to the Station House. While they were marched to their separate judgments, the *Avalanche* reported that the man

⁷⁸Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy & the American Working Class*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27, 6.

begged to be tried in the civil court or “shot in his tracks,” rather than face his commanding officials.⁷⁹ The article made sure to clarify that the man was a “Massachusetts native,” not a Southerner.

In the winter of 1864, the *Nashville Daily Union* reported on a similar incident, in the city that cause a “considerable stir.” In this case, a “white man with a negro woman of the deepest ebony, hanging on his arm,” were seen walking together “on the promenade between Cherry and the Square.” According to the account, the man “wore an air of satisfaction,” while “the sable damsel bore her ‘blushing honors’ with manifest pride,” as they “were the observed of all observers.” While the Memphis article could assure its readers that the man was an outsider, the Nashville reporter could not give the same assurance, stating, “we do not know whether he was a native or imported miscegenator.”⁸⁰

These are two cases of many that were reported in local newspapers in Nashville and Memphis, many including the comments regarding whether the offending white man was from the North or a native Southerner. This concern over the men’s origins suggests that the writers believed local white men knew better than to disrupt the social order by parading around publicly with Black women on their arms. Once again, it is apparent that the primary concern of the authors and those who were in pursuit of the Federal marine was more the public display of miscegenation than the reality of interracial sex.

The reports did not stop at local sightings. On the national stage, reports were often used to raise doubt around the viability and danger of Black freedom, and to deter others from partaking in interracial relationships. In July 1863, the *Nashville Daily Union* and the *Memphis Bulletin* recounted the dramatic events that transpired between a white lawyer, Mr. Andrews, and

⁷⁹ *Memphis Avalanche*, June 9, 1862.

⁸⁰ *Nashville Daily Union*, October 7, 1864.

a “notorious negro courtesan,” Josephine Wilson. Andrews was originally from Virginia but had abandoned his wife and four children to move to New York. Allegedly, Andrews was known by police as “an habitual associate of thieves and prostitutes,” who had been living with Wilson for most of his stay in the city. Wilson was not only a “courtesan” herself, but had “kept a house of prostitution in this city for twelve years,” which had recently been disbanded as a result of “a complaint having been made against it.” Evidently, not only was Wilson a Black prostitute, she was likely a wealthy brothel owner who had won herself some economic, social, and legal (however attained) freedom, until that night.

Not only had Andrews been living with this madam, he tried to rescue her from the legal ramifications of the complaint, asking the Sergeant first, if he could take her away and then, to “plead her case” after he escorted her to the Court hearing. Andrews was denied both requests, but managed to place bond on her behalf, after which they ran away together. The report closed with a notable comment: “It strikes us there is a very pungent moral in this sketch, which must taste acidulously to the palates of those persons who charge the Administration with favoring negro equality.” According to the *Nashville Daily Union*, a pro-Union newspaper, reporting six months after the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation, the account served as proof of the danger Black freedom and equality posed to the social order of America. White men abandoning their wives and children for Black women, or Black prostitutes was a nightmare that plagued white Americans as Black freedom was born in the South.⁸¹

Besides how these women were perceived, it is undeniable that there was likely an element of protest behind the decision to be seen promenading with white men. In 1849, Frederick Douglass, Julia Griffiths, an English woman that worked for his newspaper, *The North*

⁸¹ *Nashville Daily Union*, July 21, 1863.

Star, and her sisters, were seen walking arm in arm through New York City. The sighting provoked a riot, and unperturbed Douglass invited Griffiths to stay with his family, which sparked further objection. Douglass' walking and living with this white woman were direct rejections of the status quo that rendered these interracial connections inappropriate. Evidently, Douglass enjoyed how such simple acts could undermine white supremacy, and it is likely that many of the reported women seen with white men, were making the same statement.⁸²

This fear reigned even before the Civil War. When asked about Black equality in the presidential debates, Abraham Lincoln, in clarifying his position on the issue, stated that he did not see Black men and women as moral, intellectual, or political equals. He refuted the zero-sum framework of the debate by saying: "I do not understand that because I do not want a negro woman for a slave, I must necessarily want her for a wife." He continued, "I certainly never have wanted a black woman as a slave or wife," thus, he proposed a third option: "making [n]either slaves nor wives of negroes."⁸³ Although Lincoln was addressing the broader question of Black equality, his gendered rhetorical choice demonstrated the fear that ran at the core of white Americans' visions of Black freedom: the erosion of white supremacy through Black women.

Even after the end of the Civil War, the *Republican Banner* of Nashville, Tennessee, reported on the recent marriage of a "Federal soldier," to a "negro woman in Americus, Georgia." Although the couple had found someone willing to marry them, the soldier's "comrades met together, presented him with a coat of tar and feathers, and drove him out of the town," shortly followed by the ousting of the minister who had officiated the marriage.⁸⁴ This

⁸² Frank E. Fee Jr., "To No One More Indebted: Frederick Douglass and Julia Griffiths, 1849-1863," *Journalism History*, Vol 37, Iss.1., (Spring 2011), 19; David Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, (London: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2018), 229.

⁸³ "The Views of Abraham Lincoln on that Question," *Memphis Bulletin*, June 17, 1865.

⁸⁴ *Republican Banner*, Nashville, Tennessee, Wed, Nov 01, 1865.

violent episode was reported on with no interpretative comment by the journalist, as though the account spoke for itself: miscegenation, not just interracial sex, but the choice of Black women as marital partners, did not, and would not be an acceptable part of American life.

The proliferation of these reports shows that white Americans deemed free Black women a threat to the social order. Enslavement immediately privatized whatever took place between Black women and their masters, or other white men who they were with by force or by choice. However, the destruction of slavery, and the possibility of Black women becoming citizens, pushed interracial sex into public view, with the potential to transform Black women from illicit and degraded secrets to elevated and civilized wives of white men.

* * *

From instances of rape, relationships of coercion and advantage, prostitution, and the punishment of prostitution, Black women's experiences during the Civil War reveal the centrality of Black women's sexuality to the freedom they longed for but could not fully secure for themselves. The world they navigated was not only dictated by enslavement, but the ideologies that placed them as appropriate victims of sexual violence, and biologically destined to occupy an illicit space in American society. The examples of both the "Magdalen Camp." in Norfolk, Virginia, and the process of licensing in Nashville and Memphis, reveal the impact racialized ideas of gender could shape the outcomes of Black women's efforts to build freedom. Whether within and outside of the sex trade, Black women could not rewrite the ideas of their sexuality. Nonetheless, Black women pushed, where they could, to demand dignity, protection,

and agency over their sexuality, no matter the outcome, demonstrating the falsity of white Americans' judgments of them.

CHAPTER 3

“Torch in Hand:” Black Northern Women’s Civil War Visions of Freedom

A few days after her return to her hometown, Syracuse, New York, from a brief stint teaching freedpeople in Norfolk, Virginia, Edmonia Goodelle Highgate stood before the National Convention of Colored Men. Having returned from the field due to ill health, which her counterpart Sallie Daffin described as an “aberration of the mind,” the twenty-year-old woman struggled to make it through her address.¹ Most of the 150 delegates from around the North and border states were major “black religious, political, literary, or community” leaders.² Far removed from the battlefield, but thoroughly invested in its outcome and the potential of Black freedom, the delegates denounced colonization efforts and demanded “equality before the law.”³ Frederick Douglass, the President of the Convention and friend of Highgate’s parents, invited the “accomplished young woman,” one of only two women permitted to speak at the Convention, the other being Frances Ellen Harper Watkins.⁴

Highgate opened with a humility that marked her age and gender. As a young woman, she could not presume to “tell the Convention what they ought to do.” But she had, along with others, given some “*thought* about what had been proposed.”⁵ Coughing sporadically and struggling through her “terrible malady,” she encouraged her fellow Black abolitionists, alluding

¹ *The Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men, held in the City of Syracuse, N.Y., October 4,5,6, and 7, with the Bill of Wrongs and Rights, and the Address to the American People*, (Boston: J.S. Rock and G. L. Ruffin), 1864, 15.

² David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 440.

³ *Ibis*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Eric Gardener, "Each Atomic Part" Edmonia Highgate Goodelle Highgate's African American Transcendentalism," in Phyllis Jana L. Argersinger, *Toward a Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press,2014), 281.

to the words of Jesus in “The Sermon on the Mount,” to “trust in God and press on, and not abate one jot or tittle until the glorious day of jubilee shall come.” Highgate legitimized her encouragements, and the mission of those gathered, by aligning them with the infallible laws of God, a liberationist theology that marked the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) tradition from which she came.⁶

* * *

Edmonia Highgate was one of many Black women from the North who played an active part in the Black abolitionist movement, and who were embedded in the long tradition of Black women’s freedom building efforts. She was also one of 437 Black workers that served as missionaries in the American Missionary Association (AMA), 174 of whom were women.⁷ In the Civil War years, particularly 1864 onwards, Black abolitionist women from New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Ohio traveled to the South to work as teachers of the newly freed people. This means that multiple Union occupied locations became home not only to formerly enslaved women who hoped to secure and define freedom, but also to free Black Northern women who hoped to contribute to the same, on their behalf. Prior to attending the Convention, Highgate had been one of these women. She had lived and worked in Norfolk, Virginia, deployed by the AMA, with five other Northern Black women: Edmonia Highgate, Blanche Harris, Sara G. Stanley, Clara Duncan, and Sallie Daffin.

⁶ Eric Gardner argues that Highgate’s use of “jot and tittle” was a self-deprecating move to endear herself to her almost exclusively male audience, a means of making her words lighter. However, in contextualizing this turn of phrase in the Bible, it is more likely that Highgate intentionally used this wording to legitimize her words and demonstrate the intellectual underpinnings of her actions. Eric Gardner, “Each Atomic Part,” 282.

⁷Clara DeBoer, “The Role of Afro-Americans in the Origin and Work of the American Missionary Association, Part 2,” Ph.D. Diss. (University Microfilm International, 1973), 492.

These women's pre-war experiences, as mostly middle-class Black abolitionists, informed their views about the future of the freed people. Thus, Highgate's brief comments to the Convention, give us clear insight into what is an obvious, but often sidelined, reality: Black women were active intellectuals, and much of their ideas were embodied in their missionary activity in the South. Yet, while they brought their ideas South to the newly freed people, Norfolk, Virginia became the crucible in which their ideas were tested and transformed. This is the reason that examination of these figures is included in this study. While the bulk of this project is focused on the efforts of the formerly enslaved to secure and define freedom, examining the transformation of Northern free Black women's ideas once in the South, experiencing the day-to-day challenges of freedom building, demonstrates the harsh realities that existed for Black women regardless of their class status or intentions.

The Black abolitionist movement invited countless men and women to express their views in abolitionist magazines and at conventions, but not all had that opportunity (Highgate and Daffin were the only ones in this cohort who did). Nonetheless, looking at their service among the freedpeople, it is evident that they moved through the South with staunch abolitionist convictions, determined to make themselves the hands and feet of the Black abolitionist movement. They aimed to be those who would deliver freedom to the newly free by training them in their idealized ways of freedom.

The ideals, and ideal means, of Black abolitionists, were, indeed, diverse. As David Blight highlights, many of those who attended the Convention in 1864 were longstanding abolitionist rivals. However, one speech made by Douglass at the Convention surmised the central aims Black abolitionists had for their own freedom and that of the enslaved. Douglass declared that "the cause which we come here to promote is sacred," going on share his vision of

the “wide, wide world” that would promote “freedom, progress, elevation, and perfect enfranchisement of the entire colored people,” in America.⁸ For Black abolitionists like Highgate and her Black women missionary counterparts, these aims lit the torch they brought to the South: a belief in a future in which Black men and women were uplifted, improving themselves through education, work, and the right to vote. These broad aims drove them to the missionary field as an extension of the freedom building work in which they were already involved.

These Black women occupied unique proximity to the formerly enslaved people. Black men also went South as missionaries serving mainly in administrative roles, as ministers and chaplains, for aid agencies and churches. While it cannot be argued that these missionary men were removed from interactions with the freed people because of their modes of service, their positions and vantage points differed from Black women missionaries. These women were in the trenches, face to face, day-to-day, with the freedpeople in their classrooms, and living among them behind Union lines.⁹ They built relationships with children and adults, expanding their service outside the walls of their classrooms, to meet the needs of the people. Allying themselves with missionary agencies, most notably the AMA, free Black women went “torch in hand” to the South, to make their visions of freedom a reality among the freedpeople.¹⁰

The realities of class must be acknowledged and considered in the discussion of Northern Black women’s interactions with the newly freed people. Without a consideration of class, it is easy to conflate it with race and overstate the commonalities between the two demographics. Indeed, Black northern people were bound to their enslaved counterparts by the racialization of

⁸ Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, 441.

⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹ Judith Weisenfeld, “‘Who is Sufficient for These Things?’ Sara G. Stanley and the American Missionary Association, 1864-1868,” *Church History*, Vol. 60, No. 4., (Dec, 1991), 494.

¹⁰ Benjamin T. Tanner, *An Apology for African Methodism*, (Baltimore: 1867), 448.

US law and society, but also by the very existence of the institution of slavery, which defined the terms and limits of Black freedom in the pre-war era. As formerly enslaved people, manumitted or freed in the Revolutionary era, Black women in the antebellum North occupied many ranks, from “illiterate indentured servants... [to] well-read activist.”¹¹ However, most Black women who became missionaries to the South during the Civil War, in particular those considered in this chapter, represent “the minority of antebellum African American women” whose “class status and rigorous education positioned them in a burgeoning black elite and entitled them to its benefits.”¹² As Erica Armstrong Dunbar argues, being removed from the condition of poverty allowed elite Black women to participate in political and social activism, contributing to “definitions of abolitionism in its formative moments.”¹³ As a result, these Black women had amplified voices that could, and did, participate more in debates regarding Black freedom than any enslaved woman, or even lower class free women. Thus, they arrived in the South steeped in a commitment to the cause and clothed in the trappings of the Black elite and middle-class culture that fundamentally shaped their approach to the freed people.

Missionary Charlotte Forten serves as the epitome of elite Black missionaries from the North. Forten, who served as the only Black missionary to the Sea Islands, has become the representative figure for historiographical examinations of Black women missionaries to the Civil War South. Her extensive journal, which stretches from 1854 through 1864, reveals her upper-middle-class background. Born in 1837 in Philadelphia, Charlotte was the daughter of wealthy Black abolitionists. Her father Robert Bridges Forten, a sailmaker and abolitionist, was the son of James Forten who had built his wealth as an entrepreneur of sail-making and inventor

¹¹ Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*

of more proficient sail-making tools.¹⁴ Thus, by the time of Charlotte's birth, the Fortens were several generations removed from slavery and members of the Philadelphia elite class. Forten attended school in Salem, Massachusetts where she mastered French, German, Latin and excelled as a scholar. Although "her race was always uppermost" in her mind, shaping her relationships with others, her country, and God, and raised in abolitionism, Charlotte was unprepared for what she met in the Sea Islands.¹⁵ Upon her arrival, Charlotte was struck by the culture and behaviors of the newly freedpeople, finding them foreign and peculiar. Forten reported them as "interesting," "poor creatures," and "the most dismal specimens [she] ever saw."¹⁶

Her expressions of pity and fascination reveal the separation she (appropriately) felt between herself and the newly freedpeople. After five months of residence on the island, Forten wrote, "It is all like a dream still, and will be for a long time, I suppose; a strange wild dream...Everything is still very strange."¹⁷ Unfamiliarity marked Forten's encounters with the formerly enslaved people, much like her white counterparts, although she consistently expressed care and concern for them and their families. Forten, over the time of her missionary service, developed closer and invested relationships with newly freed people than recounted by her white missionary counterparts. Her diary is littered with stories about freedwomen, naming them, where they were from, the family members they lived with, and those they had left behind, demonstrating a keen awareness of the importance of kinship and family in a way that is not found as easily in the records of her white missionary co-laborers.¹⁸

¹⁴ Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 68-70.

¹⁵ Ray Allen Billington, "Introduction," in Charlotte L. Forten, *The Journal of Charlotte Forten*, (New York: Dryden Press, 1953), 2.

¹⁶ Forten, *The Journal of Charlotte Forten*, 126

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 130-131.

¹⁸ Find examples of this in Forten, *The Journal of Charlotte Forten*, see 142-164; Although Forten's diary provides ample material for exploration, she was atypical among the five women who were, mostly, lower-middle-class and

The missionary activity of Civil War era women has been conceptualized by some historians as a permissible expansion of the “domestic sphere,” a means by which women were breaking into the public sphere without disrupting the ideals of the “cult of true womanhood.”¹⁹ In looking at the lives and work of missionary women, both Black and white, this, while true, minimizes the radical nature of their efforts. In going South, they placed themselves on the front lines of war, entering areas of heightened risk of racial violence (for Black women), as well as removing themselves from social and family networks of protection. Black women traveled to places unknown to them, to serve a population they felt a kinship to, having formerly enslaved relatives and friends up North, some of whom were likely fugitive slaves building fragile freedom for themselves. Simultaneously, they were far removed from the conditions, experiences, and cultures of enslavement among Black people in the South.

Duncan, Stanley, Highgate, Daffin, and Harris, alongside Mary S. Peake (Norfolk-born free Black teacher) were active in the public spheres of their respective hometowns prior to the war. They worked as teachers, writers, cared for the sick, and became involved in benevolent societies. All were from families deeply embedded in abolitionism. Thus, it is more useful to conceptualize Black women’s missionary work in the South as an expansion of their geographical scope of influence, rather than an expansion of the private sphere in which they never truly resided. Becoming missionaries gave Black abolitionist women mobility that they previously did not have (particularly on American soil). No longer constrained by the narrow

connected through the AMA. Thus, Forten is outlined here as she provides a clear example of the impact Black missionaries’ class had upon their work and relationships with the freedpeople.

¹⁹ Shirley Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860*, (Tennessee: University Tennessee Press, 1992), 41.

spaces of freedom, boxed in by the threat of the slave regime, the Civil War made going to aid their enslaved brothers and sisters in the “region of heartbreaks,” a new possibility.²⁰

Seeing Black women’s missionary work as a socially acceptable method of expanding the private sphere is an underestimation of how revolutionary their missionary efforts were. Thus, on close analysis of the lives and Civil War time efforts of the aforementioned women, it becomes clear that they did not ever belong in the “cult of true womanhood,” but rather to a long tradition of Black women abolitionist activists’ struggles for freedom. Not only were Black women racially excluded from the “cult of true womanhood,” but the white supremacist image of Black women’s “degradation, promiscuity, and passivity” was a construct about enslaved and free Black women alike.²¹ However, as Brenda Stevenson argues, Black women, particularly enslaved women, carved a “counterimage” that “flew provocatively in the face” of these racialized gender stereotypes. This “counterimage” portrayed through slave and WPA narratives, celebrated Black women as heroes who protected and defended their “bonded kin,” as directly as they could.²² These activist women fit into this “counterimage.” Not only did they move as advocates for the newly free, but their efforts in the Civil War also required them to sacrifice the careers they were building, and for some, better income opportunities, health, and security. All these sacrifices were willingly made as these women perceived the revolutionary opportunity that the war presented: to play a part in defining freedom for (and with) the formerly enslaved.

Situating their missionary efforts in their broader lives and activism before entering the field, it is clear they belonged to a long tradition of Black abolitionism. This reality deepens our

²⁰ Edmonia Highgate to George Whipple, June 1, 1864, Norfolk, Virginia, AMA Archives, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana (hereafter AMAA).

²¹ Brenda Stevenson, “Gender Convention, Ideals, and Identity Among Antebellum Virginia Slave Women,” in Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, *More Than Chattel, Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996), 169.

²² *Ibid.*

understanding of the vision of freedom these women brought to the newly freed people and embeds their freedom-building efforts during the Civil War era into a longer narrative. They were abolitionists in the trenches, where oration and ideals hit the rough terrain of freedom building. They seized the opportunity to become the hands and feet of the abolitionist movement, amid the war. Shortly after their arrival, they were greeted with the harsh realities of aiding a population that had been stripped of everything, alongside the challenges of interracial missionary work. The field of Norfolk, Virginia, became a transformative space for these women and their ideas, even though they had set out to be the agents of newly freed people's metamorphosis into citizens.

* * *

In order to situate these women's experiences in Union occupied Norfolk, Virginia, into their broader lives, it is important to sketch their biographies. Through collating their biographies sequentially, before examining their letters thematically as a cohort, their varied class statuses but shared abolitionist ideals come to the foreground. This brings important context to more completely understand their letters and recounted experiences.

Born in Philadelphia in 1838, Sarah Louise "Sallie" Daffin, grew up in a rising middle-class family with her brother and mother, Cecelia. Her mother, who was originally from the District of Columbia, worked as a dressmaker and received income from lodgers in her family home. The Daffins prized literacy, with Sallie, her brother, and mother all noted as literate in the Philadelphia African American Census of 1847. Sallie attended school from age six until eleven, after which she worked alongside her mother as a dressmaker for eight years. The census also recorded that several members of the household were involved in "beneficial societies" and

attended religious meetings.²³ While the “beneficial societies” are not named in the census, Sallie’s earned prizes from the Literary Association of Bethel AME Church, which they attended as a family, suggests they were active in antislavery circles and other aid groups in the Black community. Sallie enrolled in the Institute for Colored Youth at the age of 20 where she gained a diploma by 1860 and won the first “mathematical prize offered to female students.” According to her biographer, Benjamin Tanner, Daffin attended the Institute because “her thoughts were upon books and work, not the work of the needle, but of the brain and heart; she thought even of going as a missionary to dear old Fatherland, Africa.”²⁴ Though she did not become a missionary to Africa, Daffin became a teacher at the Chester School in New Jersey in 1860, and then moved to Delaware, New Jersey in 1863 to work as a teacher in a school there.

Between her awards, educational achievements at the renowned Institute for Colored Youth, and teaching, Sallie was well known in Black abolitionist circles in Philadelphia by 1861. AME newspaper, *The Christian Recorder*, reported on the progress of the Chester school and described her as an “interesting and useful young woman,” a graduate of the Institute, that had “succeeded well,” so far. By 1863 the *Recorder*’s praise for Sallie had grown even more, with the writer exclaiming that the schools “are on the advance, especially since Miss Sallie L. Daffin has been in our midst.” Not only in the schools but, rather, throughout the community, Daffin brought a “fresh impetus” to “the cause of moral and intellectual improvement,” both of which, led her to be “almost idolized by our own people.”²⁵ Daffin’s work and character made a notable impact on the local Black communities. Evidently, she was known and valued for her

²³ Philadelphia African American Census of 1847, RG2/Pho vol. 1 (City), Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College, accessed via <https://ds-pages.swarthmore.edu/paac/data/>; Eric Gardner, *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth Century African American Literature*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 140.

²⁴ Tanner, *An Apology for African Methodism*, 447.

²⁵ *The Christian Recorder*, May 18, 1861, accessed via: [accessible.com](https://www.accessible.com/), January 2021; *The Christian Recorder*, July 25, 1863, accessed via: [accessible.com](https://www.accessible.com/), January 2021.

commitment to education as a key facet of freedom, living as an example to her students and peers. Working for the AMA was not Sallie's introduction to freedom-building, but rather an extension of her efforts among Black people in the North.

The archives of the AMA do not contain any records of her application. The first we hear from Sallie herself, is in two articles she wrote for the *Christian Recorder*, in 1863, after the Emancipation Proclamation, but before her deployment to the South. The first, published May 30, 1863, entitled "Example Better Than Precept," was a clear enunciation of her antislavery ideals. She argued that "in social relations, political affairs and in religion," it is a truism that "example is better than precept." Beginning with a metaphor of a parent who tries to instill principles of temperance in their children, whilst being drunkards themselves, Daffin highlights the hypocrisy America displayed. "Such evils as the Fugitive Slave Law and the slave trade," which "would be abolished forever, if those who profess friendship and sympathy for the oppressed, and a belief in the equality of all mankind" would "act according to these precepts."²⁶

According to Daffin, the issue of "three millions and a half of our brethren... beneath the tyrants' yoke," was a product of Americans, even those who claimed to support antislavery, failing to live out or make tangible the principles to which they ascribed. In fact, their "example is directly opposed to their teaching" and so their "effect is lost on us." Not only did this render their precepts meaningless, but it meant that Black freedom builders, and true abolitionists, could "consider them only half friends, if not whole foes." She warned her readers to remember that "an open enemy is better than a false friend." To Daffin, antislavery needed true allies, people who fought in deed for her enslaved brethren to "enjoy that which the almighty ordained they

²⁶ Sallie Daffin, *The Christian Recorder*, May 30, 1863, accessed via: [accessible.com](https://www.accessible.com), January 2021.

should.”²⁷ What becomes clear in this piece, is Daffin’s commitment to actions, making her efforts as a teacher in the North and South the very examples that demonstrated her precepts.

Daffin closed the piece by arguing that Christianity, “true religion,” consists of deeds rather than voice alone, especially as it is the deeds that “affords light to them around him.” As demonstrated by the “great man” John Brown, precepts lived out “excites a desire in the bosom” of others to join the cause, and has “universal value.”²⁸ This section is an expression of Frederick Douglass’ quintessential indictment of “the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land,” written in his narrative published in 1845.²⁹ He argued that the only reason to claim this as “Christianity” was a deceitful one, much like Daffin’s “false friend.” Daffin’s argumentation in this piece demonstrates a familiarity with Douglass’s work and situates her in the moral abolitionism of the 1830s and 1840s.³⁰

Daffin published a second, shorter, piece in August 1863, entitled “Affectation,” that seems, at a glance, to be a tirade against an unknown subject. She decries affectation as “the fruit of selfish disposition” and “the worst of all moral evils” that makes a man “ridiculous.” In the context of her previous piece, and knowing her to be serving as a teacher in Delaware, New Jersey it seems that Daffin was enraged by her experiences with “false friends” to the abolitionist movement.³¹ Daffin’s family background, her education, her belief in Christian egalitarianism

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, (Boston: Antislavery Office, 1849), 118.

³⁰ There were several waves of abolitionism, the abolitionism of the 1830s and 1840s was marked by religious motivations and egalitarian spirit, while the later movements of the 1850s were motivated by political and economic arguments, particularly out of reaction to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Bleeding Kansas, and the rise of the free soil movement.

³¹ Given that she is writing amidst the war years, after emancipation, when discussions of the future of freedpeople were on the rise, it is safe to assume that her frustration is born of those who proved to be antislavery but not supporters of Black citizenship and equality. This is hard to know as she did not clarify her subject but seems likely in the context of who we know her to be, and the timing of the letter.

and the country's refusal to live up to its ideals, drove her missionary efforts. Sallie Daffin walked in the traditions of Black abolitionist activism as a teacher and missionary to the South.

Edmonia Goodelle Highgate had a similar pre-war background. Born in 1844 to Charles and Hannah Highgate in Syracuse, New York, the Highgates were a typical Black abolitionist family; literate, and upwardly mobile middle-class. It is thought that Charles and Hannah Highgate were formerly enslaved people from Virginia, who had moved to Syracuse before Edmonia's birth, where they became involved in local Black abolitionist efforts. Charles worked as a barber but also worked alongside William Wells Brown and other major antislavery figures, serving on a committee to draft resolutions for anticolonization meetings in Syracuse.³² Her mother, Hannah, served as a member of the Provisional Committee that worked to raise money for Samuel Ringgold Ward's abolitionist newspaper *Impartial Citizen*. This committee was composed of Black women who were the wives of ministers, teachers, with whom they shared antislavery work.³³ Additionally, they listed their home as available to boarders, in Frederick Douglass' newspaper *The North Star*, which suggests their income and social connections with the broader Black community.³⁴

Edmonia grew up in this activist home, deeply interconnected with the broader abolitionist movement in upstate, New York, in the circles in which Frederick Douglass moved.³⁵ Highgate attended and graduated from Syracuse High School in 1861, being the only Black child in her graduating class. She went on to obtain her teaching certificate from the Syracuse Board of Education in 1861. Despite her credentials, the state would not allow her to

³² Gardner, "Each Atomic Part," 229-230.

³³ "Circular by Provisional Committee of the *Impartial Citizen*," August 1849, in Peter Ripley (ed), *Black Abolitionist Papers: The United States, 1847-1858*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1991), 38-41.

³⁴ Gardner, "Each Atomic Part," 229.

³⁵ It is likely that her parents were the connection that led Douglass to invite her to speak at the National Colored Men's Convention in 1864.

teach in schools in her hometown, thus she moved first to Montrose, Pennsylvania, where she worked as a teacher and began working with the Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association. In late 1861, Highgate moved to Binghamton, New York, where she worked as the principal of a Black school until 1864 when she applied to go South with the AMA.³⁶ During this time she was also a member of Syracuse Plymouth Congregational Church, led by Reverend Michael E. Strieby, Ohio-born Oberlin graduate and antislavery advocate, who went on to serve as a Secretary to the AMA the same year Highgate became a missionary.³⁷

Unlike Daffin, Highgate's application to become a teacher with the AMA is available and serves as an introduction to her abolitionist ideology and visions of freedom. First, Highgate gave her credentials as a teacher for almost three years "among my own people in what might be well called a 'missionary field of labor.'" She described herself as a "strong and healthy" twenty-year-old, ready to embrace "self-denial, self discipline" and possessing "domestic qualifications" necessary to "labor advantageously in that field for my newly freed brethren."³⁸ In a follow-up letter, Highgate elaborated on her "intense interest" to be among the freed people. Even though she had no location in mind, she expressed hope to go primarily as a missionary, and secondarily as a teacher.³⁹

Both these letters reveal Highgate's heart for the work. Her self-assessment was indeed correct: Highgate had already left home to pursue freedom building work with Northern free Blacks and with the recently emancipated sent North to Pennsylvania, thus had been serving as a missionary without the official deployment. Further, she described the freedpeople as her "newly

³⁶ Roseanne Wholihan, Danielle R. Warren, Audrey R. Carey, and Chelsea Racovites, "Biographical Sketch of Edmonia Goodelle Highgate," in *Women and Social Movements*, (Alexandria: Alexander Street, 2016), 1.

³⁷ Annual Reports of Oberlin College, (Oberlin: Oberlin College, 1900), 53.

³⁸ Edmonia Highgate to Rev. G. Whipple, January 18, 1864, Binghamton, New York, AMAA.

³⁹ Edmonia Highgate to S.S. Jocelyn, January 30, 1864, Binghamton, New York, AMAA.

freed brethren,” displaying a sense of kinship and duty that drove her missionary efforts. Her parents’ active involvement in supporting the Black abolitionist movement led Edmonia to seek out parts to play in freedom building for Black people in both the North and South. Highgate was not an onlooker, but rather, from a young age believed freedom making to be something to which she could contribute.

Highgate’s religious positionality was not as clear as her Black missionary women counterparts, which seemingly made securing a reference for the AMA application necessary. In a letter written to Ira H. Cobb, a hardware merchant, philanthropist “connected with nearly all the charitable institutions of the city,” and an agent of the Underground Railroad, Highgate saw the need to defend her iteration of faith.⁴⁰ She wrote: “You may have heard some rumor of my wavering in some points, in true orthodox belief, but I wrote out a full statement of my views to brother Strieby, and his dear wife will tell you that it was satisfactory to him.”⁴¹ Eric Gardner argues that Highgate, at this time, entertained transcendentalism (she would embrace it fully in the post-war era) as a “mode for understanding, explaining, and trying to change her world,” a sect that removed her from Christian orthodoxy.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ira A. Cobb was a member of the Vigilance Committee of Syracuse, one of many local abolitionist groups that protected fugitive slaves. He played an active part in the “Jerry Rescue,” in October 1851. ‘Jerry Rescue’ became the name for a fugitive slave case of William ‘Jerry’ Henry, an escaped slave from Missouri, who had been captured by Syracuse police. An abolitionist meeting took place the same day, and many went to the police station, battered down the doors and rescued ‘Jerry’ Henry, in active defiance of the Fugitive Slave Law. Cobb acted as a lookout, monitoring the events of the courtroom, waiting to give the gathered mob their cue. When they finally made entry, Cobb extinguished the gas lights in the room Jerry was being held. He was eventually violently arrested and tried for violation of the Fugitive Slave Law; he went free on the basis of a mistrial. Angela F. Murphy, *The Jerry Rescue: The Fugitive Slave Law, Northern Rights, and the American Sectional Crisis*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 105, 118-119, 128, 141.

⁴¹ Edmonia Highgate to Ira H. Cobb, Jan 22, 1864, Binghamton, New York, AMAA.

⁴² Historian Peter Wirzbicki argues that “the philosophy of transcendentalism and the politics of abolitionism were mutually reinforcing,” in the antebellum era. Transcendentalism asserted the “duty to develop individual personalities and promote the union of manual and intellectual labor,” which were ideals that found their expression in abolitionism, driven by Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth in the mid-19th century. He highlights Alexander Crummell, the abolitionist minister and African nationalist, as one of the foundational voices of abolitionism’s transcendentalist hue. In the 1840s Crummell argued that while slavery sought to deny Black freedom, the free North “attempted to destroy their dignity and sense of worth,” which meant that Black people “would have to reject not just the racism of white America, but also the system of thought that underlay its treatment of African

Nonetheless, it seems Stieby did, indeed, accept her confession of faith as true. He wrote to S.S. Jocelyn days, after her initial application, vouching for her Christian character. According to Stieby, Edmonia was an “unusually talented and efficient girl” with “a good deal of experience in teaching.” As a member of his church, he believed she would “make a most admirable teacher among the free men,” especially as “she has some of the African blood in her own veins.”⁴³ Much like Sallie Daffin, Edmonia was a notably gifted woman and had demonstrated a commitment to active abolitionism by moving wherever she could use her skillset to benefit her Black brothers and sisters, both free and formerly enslaved. Working as a principal in Binghamton would have afforded Highgate a decent income. Thus, forfeiting that to become a missionary for the AMA involved a great deal of financial sacrifice.

Each of these letters and Highgate’s biography situate her as a known member of the Black abolitionist community in New York, involved in, or at least adjacent to, those directly involved with the Underground Railroad, and the Black press. Through this proximity, Edmonia believed herself to have a role to play in the engineering of freedom throughout the nation, making her work in the South an expected continuation of the chapters of activism written by her parents and her pre-war efforts. Her visions of freedom, to this point, centered on what free Blacks had to offer the newly free; education, self-discipline, and self-denial.

Americans,” a philosophical and metaphysical requirement. He argued that Black people had been reduced to an understanding of self which was based on the senses, sheer physical labor, thus, to Crummell, freedom required much more than the ending of slavery, but the cultivation of “Spirit, reason, and moral nature,” which would allow for Black people to “be radically, transcendently free in his internal self,” prerequisites for political and social freedom. Highgate, being in the same circles as Douglass was exposed to this iteration of Black abolitionism, and her letters, and defense of her faith reveal that she was indeed influenced by, if not thoroughly committed to, Transcendentalist thought. As a then new philosophical movement, that was an intermingling of secular and religious ideas drawn from English Romantic poetry, German metaphysics, and a “new theology that emphasized personal and subjective religious experience,” it was far from the realms of religious orthodoxy, hence Highgate’s need to prove herself a part of the faith. Gardner, “Each Atomic Part,” 227; Peter Wirzbicki, *For the Higher Law: Black and White Transcendentalists Against Slavery*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 2-4, 21-25, 2.

⁴³ Michael E. Stieby to S. S. Jocelyn, January 24 1864, New York, AMAA.

Much as involvement in abolitionist circles shaped Edmonia Highgate and Sallie Daffin, Oberlin College served as a major influence on the remaining three women: Sara Griffiths Stanley, Blanche Victoria Harris, and Clara Duncan. Each of these women belonged to what Ellen N. Lawson calls the “Talented Thousandth,” who attended the radical antislavery college before the Civil War.⁴⁴ The college served as an ideological environment that undoubtedly shaped their antislavery ideas and visions of freedom. Founded in 1833 by radical evangelical John J. Shipherd and Philo P. Stewart who desired the college to be an “intentional community dedicated to the glorification of God and the Christian conversion of humankind.” Oberlin’s welcome of women set it apart from day one as well as the resolution by the board of trustees in 1835 that stated: “that the education of the people of color is a matter of great interest and should be encouraged and sustained in the institution.”⁴⁵ From then onwards Oberlin became a radical antislavery college attended by white and Black people “interested in education and activism.”⁴⁶ Not only did the institution stand for the abolition of slavery, but the committee pledged to fight for “the eradication of color prejudice in their community and all of American society.”⁴⁷ Both the institution and town, on the whole, boasted a radical commitment to immediate abolition, with integrated public schools, churches, and a vibrant antislavery society that had a membership of over 200 on its first day.⁴⁸ Sara, Blanche, and Clara’s abolitionist ideals alongside their

⁴⁴ Ellen N. Lawson and Marlene Merrill argue that DuBois’ call for a “talented tenth” in the early twentieth century education as a means of Black uplift, as an ideology that many Black individuals subscribed to and lived out in the antebellum era. These missionary women certainly serve as examples of this argument. They also argue the importance of education, for the uplift, of Black women due to the narrow career prospects they had without a college education: domestic service, which was notorious for exposing Black women to sexual abuse. “The Antebellum ‘Talented Thousandth:’ Black College Students at Oberlin Before the Civil War,” *Journal of Negro Education*, Vol 52, No. 2 (1993), 146, 155.

⁴⁵ Gary Kornblith and Carol Lasser, *Exclusive Utopia: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Oberlin, Ohio*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018), 10, 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 10.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

understanding of education as an important part of freedom were shaped by their individual experiences as Black women, and fortified by their Oberlin years.

The oldest of the cohort was Sara G. Stanley, born in 1837 in New Bern, North Carolina.⁴⁹ She was a biracial descendent of a prominent white slaveholder and an enslaved Ibo great-grandmother. Their son John C. Stanley (Sara's grandfather) was manumitted for faithful service in the late 18th century.⁵⁰ Sara's grandfather went on to own between sixty and one hundred enslaved people, and had over 1,500 acres of land, making him "the wealthiest free man of color at any time in North Carolina history."⁵¹ Stanley's status as an elite gave him many connections to both the Black and white communities in New Bern. His class as a slaveowner seemingly outweighed any racial comradery, evidenced by his submissions of fugitive slave ads to retrieve his property.⁵²

Her parents, John Stewart Stanley (son of John C. Stanley), and Frances Griffiths Stanley, therefore, were part of the Black elite of New Bern.⁵³ Though Sara and her five siblings could pass for white, they grew up "exclusively in the 'colored social circle,'" where they learned to take pride in their Black heritage.⁵⁴ Further, Sara's family prized education. Her father was known for his educational excellence, being described as unsurpassed by others and "equal to the best." They owned a store and "The Stanley School," an institution known throughout North Carolina for its excellence in teaching free Black children. As teachers, the Stanleys

⁴⁹ There is some uncertainty about the spelling of this family name. In some cases, Stanley is spelled with an "e" and in other cases, without it.

⁵⁰ Judith Weisenfeld, "Who is Sufficient for These Things?" Sara G. Stanley and the American Missionary Association, 1864-1868, in *Church History*, Vol. 60, No.4, (December 1991), 504.

⁵¹ Warren Eugene Milteer Jr, *North Carolina's Free People of Color, 1715-1885*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2020), 161.

⁵² *Ibid*, 162.

⁵³ According to Ellen Lawson, the majority of Black elites in New Bern, North Carolina were mulattoes which afforded them relative protections through family connections. Ellen Lawson and Marlene Merrill, *The Three Sarahs: Documents of Antebellum Black College Women*, (New York: E. Mellen Press, 1984), 47.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 49.

equipped the free Black community with tools to expand their freedoms, actively challenging the caste system that sought to restrict Black self-improvement.

Thus, Sara was a unique addition to the group, as she did not grow up in Northern abolitionist circles but, rather, in an elite Black Southern family surrounded by the horrors of the Peculiar Institution. In 1852, Sara traveled North to Oberlin to pursue higher education. While Sara attended Oberlin her family fled the intensifying racial violence erupting in New Bern in 1856, joining her in nearby Cleveland, Ohio. All these experiences, including attending the abolitionist college, her family's flight, and her devout Presbyterianism likely served as formative to her antislavery ideals.

After graduating, Stanley earned her teaching certificate and taught in the public school systems in Cleveland and Oberlin. Simultaneously she became a member of the Ladies Antislavery Society of Delaware, Ohio. In 1856, Stanley delivered an address on behalf of the society. Although it was a collaborative document signed by many women, Stanley's service as the spokeswoman as well as her signature, make it a valuable source for understanding her antislavery ideas. Stanley began with complaints similar to Frederick Douglass's critiques of American Christianity. She argued that it taught "adoration to the demon slavery," which "the book of record will show it falsity or truth." She went on to describe the sanctity of Black life by stating that:

*The Omnipotent, omniscient God's glorious autograph, the seal of angels is written on our brow, that immortal characteristic of Divinity- the rational, mysterious and inexplicable soul, animates our frame...*⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Sara G. Stanley, "Address of Ladies Antislavery Society of Delaware, Ohio, 1856," in Lawson, *The Three Sarahs*, 66-67.

These words were a religious declaration of Black dignity, claiming the biblical truth that they, too, were *Imago Dei*, “made in the image of God.” This was a direct rejection of white supremacist argumentation that placed Black men, women, and children as less than human, and incapable of fully developed rational thought, with the mental capabilities of children. This alone placed Sara and her antislavery counterparts in the league of radical abolitionism, which did not simply call for the end of slavery but, rather, asserted the equality of Black and white people. She went on to demand the convention “reject the phantasy of non-intervention,” to “leave conservatism behind” and instead adopt “a radical utilitarian spirit,” a salient feature of radical abolitionism.

Sara closed with a call to action: “let us cultivate our moral and mental faculties and labor to effect general diffusion of knowledge, remembering that ascendancy naturally belongs to superiority.” As a woman from a family of educators and a new Oberlin scholar, it is unsurprising that she believed that cultivation of “moral and mental faculties” and working hard to spread the gospel of antislavery would lead to greater power through “intellectual superiority.”⁵⁶ According to Sara and the Society, knowledge, and education were the keys to power, thus, her career as a teacher in the AMA must be understood as Sara’s efforts to furnish the freed people with the power they had been denied for generations.

Sara’s fierce sense of duty to the freed people and her egalitarianism become even clearer in her two letters of application to the AMA. After clarifying her credentials as an experienced teacher and Black woman, she enthused that “the Providence of God has opened in the South, so vast a field for earnest and self-abnegating missionary labor,” that had inspired “a strong conviction of duty and an irresistible desire” in her to become a teacher to the freedpeople. She

⁵⁶ Ibid.

believed God had called her to “bring these poor from the pale of humanity, into the family of man,” which she would be “very glad and happy” to do under the auspices of the AMA as the toil would allow her to “dwell nearer to God.” She went on to iterate the same ideas espoused in the antislavery speech, expressing commitment to “the moral and intellectual salvation of these ignorant, degraded... children of the beneficent Father.”⁵⁷ Although it can be argued that Sara herself exhibited some paternalistic ideas in this letter, it is more likely that she recalled the degradation she had witnessed before leaving New Bern, ascribing it to the institution of slavery rather than the people themselves. She knew, even if only through observation, just how much life slaveholders stripped from their enslaved people. It is clear, when coupled with her affirmation of their innate value as the children of God, that she saw freedom-building work as a project of restoration rather than a civilization project.

Stanley’s motivations for going South were deeply religious and intensely personal. This is further evidenced by her subsequent letter in which she described herself as “a colored woman, bound to that ignorant, long degraded, long enslaved race by the ties of love and consanguinity, they are socially and politically ‘my people.’” The only separation between herself and them, in her words, was that “the Almighty Father” in his “lovingkindness” gave her “advantages” that he “in his divine wisdom has withheld from them...” Stanley’s words show not only her commitment to the freed people but also her sincere feeling of kinship with them. It was her God-given duty to do the “work of ameliorating their condition and advancing the civilization of the people,” believing that although they were “victims of oppression and brutality,” they were “susceptible of high cultivation.”⁵⁸ Freedom was not simply the ending of enslavement, but the

⁵⁷ Sara G. Stanley to G. Whipple, January 1864, Cleveland Ohio, AMAA

⁵⁸ Sara G. Stanley to G. Whipple, 4 March 1864, Cleveland, Ohio, AMAA.

full restoration of Black dignity, and their uplift through access to opportunities enslavement had kept them from, including education, facilitated by the willing servants of God.

Blanche Harris was born in 1844 in Monroe, Michigan, to Beverley and Rebecca Harris. Like Highgate, Daffin, and Stanley, both her parents were thoroughly committed to building freedom for Black Americans both slave and free. Her father, Beverley, was involved in the antislavery movement, working alongside the famous abolitionist writer and novelist William Wells Brown (as Charles Highgate did), whilst working as a cook at Erasmus and Sarah Boyd Young Ladies Seminary and Collegiate Institution, alongside his wife who worked as a domestic servant. Blanche and her siblings were educated in the public school in Monroe, but the family was forced to relocate to Oberlin, Ohio, after Blanche was denied entrance into the Young Ladies Seminary her parents worked at, on the basis of her race.⁵⁹ Blanche enrolled at Oberlin College in 1857 and graduated with a diploma from the Literary Course in 1860.

Unfortunately, Harris' application to work for the AMA has been lost, and her visions of freedom are more fully enunciated in her later letters. Nonetheless, it is known that Harris arrived in Norfolk and quickly became the principal of an experimental school proposed by Professor Woodbury; a school for freed people taught by an exclusively Black faculty. The school opened in the Spring of 1864 with Daffin, and Highgate as her fellow teachers. Her employment as principal, given the extensive experience of the other women, suggests that she too had gained some teaching credentials and experience between her graduation from Oberlin in 1860 and her tenure with the AMA. Nonetheless, her second letter from Norfolk grants a glimpse into her freedom building visions. Writing to George Whipple in February 1864, she shared her

⁵⁹ Linda Britton Cabral, "Letters from Four Antebellum Black Women Educators to the American Missionary Association, 1863-1870," PhD Diss., (University of Massachusetts, 2006), 22; Lawson, "Talented Thousandth," 148.

prayers that she “may lead these children in their deportment during school hours,” but her more “earnest prayer” was for “strength” so that her “labor may be rewarded by seeing some of my little ones give their hearts to the Savior.”⁶⁰ Harris reveals her desire to serve as an example to the children, understanding herself to be an individual with limited but significant authority. Similarly, her concern over their salvation demonstrates her understanding of freedom as much more than learning to read and write. Instead, the motivation for her persistence was transforming their interior lives.

Harris’ first letter introduces the final, and most obscure, member of the Northern Black missionary cohort: Clara Duncan. Writing in January 1864, while she and Professor Woodbury were planning the all-Black faculty school, Harris wrote to George Whipple asking specifically for Clara to be deployed to serve at the school. Describing her as a woman “much beloved by all who know her” and eager to work with the freed people, it seems Duncan and Harris were connected either through Oberlin college or Oberlin antislavery groups. Based on Harris’ letter, it seems Duncan held similar ideas of what securing freedom required. To her, it included Black women of faith at the vanguard of the enterprise. As far as Harris was concerned, Duncan’s religious beliefs were a key qualifier for her appointment.

Clara Duncan was born in 1850 in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Her early life is relatively unknown. Much of what is known comes from her application letter to the AMA. She wrote first in February 1864, stating that she had received a letter from Blanche in which Harris told her that she had “obtained a situation for me” and that Duncan’s commission, which she had not yet received, would arrive soon. Duncan declared she was “ready to go at a moment’s waiting,” though currently enrolled at Oberlin.⁶¹ In her subsequent letter, Clara disclosed that she was an

⁶⁰ Blanche V. Harris to G. Whipple, February 22, 1864, Norfolk, Virginia, AMAA.

⁶¹ Clara Duncan to George Whipple, February 24, 1864, Oberlin Ohio, AMAA.

unmarried woman, a member of the Congregational Church in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and an “orphan unaided... trying to educate myself.” As an orphan Duncan had no external financial support, thus she had been working as a tutor and domestic for Governor George Briggs of Massachusetts, to pay Oberlin tuition. Briggs, a lawyer, was known for his stance against the expansion of slavery in the west and against South Carolina’s imprisonment of free Blacks who entered Charleston ports as workers on Northern boats.⁶² Though Briggs was no staunch abolitionist, Clara Duncan had become educated enough to secure work in the household of this outspoken legislator. While it is unknown how her employment with Briggs shaped her antislavery beliefs, it is clear that she saved enough from her employment to make the move to Oberlin for a college education where she undoubtedly refined her ideas about freedom.

An air of embarrassment lingers over her remarks about her financial position as she apologized for being unable to give her services as a volunteer. “Whatever I receive, I shall use to continue my education,” though she was “willing to make sacrifices.” Duncan was willing to endure potentially challenging living conditions but could not compromise on compensation. Evidently, she believed that for herself, let alone the freed people, an education was central to her future as a free Black woman. Duncan closed her letter by stating that she could stay for six months or longer and asked to be placed with Blanche Harris or “wherever you think is best,” as she believed she could “endure a great deal.”⁶³

Duncan’s letters hint at the life she had lived thus far, one of a poor Black orphaned girl, and how that experience shaped her as an abolitionist activist. As an orphan, Duncan had to provide for herself, yet she had become educated enough in Massachusetts to be admitted into

⁶² Sandra Harbert Petruionis, “‘Swelling That Great Tide of Humanity’: The Concord, Massachusetts, Female Antislavery Society,” *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 74, No.3., (September, 2001), 443.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Oberlin. Further, her economic position did not allow her to command her antislavery ideals as a sole motivator, but rather, her need for security and to continue her education loom large in her application. Duncan is the only one of the five women to ask directly about compensation, revealing her distance from their secure middle-class status. Her letter of support came from Marianne P. Dascomb, the Principal of Oberlin's women's department, who declared Clara would "be a valuable aid in the labors of your association among the Freemen." Not only this, but her employer, Governor Briggs of Massachusetts, offered "the best testimony concerning her moral character and her ability to make herself useful in all departments of household labor." Dascomb highlighted her ability to "scrub and wash... fit dresses, sewing" and finally offered she "had sufficient skill to teach school, which she has done successfully for two terms." Dascomb's letter shows that Duncan had furnished herself with a myriad of skills that enabled her to secure income. Duncan was adept at taking care of herself.

Though seemingly ideologically silent, her drive to be educated, alongside her willingness to suspend her studies, demonstrate her commitment to freedom-building. Becoming a missionary for the AMA came at a great cost in a world of very narrow employment options, and yet she described herself as "anxious" to serve the freed people. Duncan believed the moment of the Civil War was pivotal to building freedom for more than herself, all of which shows her understanding of antislavery as a pressing and self-sacrificial duty.

These five women traveled to Norfolk, Virginia in the spring of 1864, where they would live and work together to secure and define Black freedom. Their abolitionist efforts illuminate the ideas they brought with them: a firm belief in the importance of education; and belief in the God-ordained nature of the work and the equality of Black people. The Civil War presented

these women with an opportunity to test these ideas and implement social policies that would lead to the securing of much-desired freedom for the former enslaved.

* * *

The group of women met one another, and good work already in progress when they arrived in Norfolk, Virginia. Mary S. Peake, the first Black teacher on the AMA payroll, was one progenitor of Black freedom building in the area. Because Peake lived in Norfolk, Virginia, completely removed from the abolitionist movement and embedded in slave territory, her introduction to the mission field was markedly different to the Northern women. Nonetheless, Peake is considered here because she is emblematic of the Southern contingent of Black women who had been working to secure and define freedom in slave states, as free and enslaved Blacks, long before the war came. Peake belonged to vibrant Black communities in both Norfolk and Hampton prior to the war, and though their ideologies were not espoused at Conventions or in the Black press, Peake and her community lived their abolitionist ideals as direct resistance to the slave regime in which they lived. As Thavolia Glymph argues, Black Southern women “mobilized to support... Emancipation, taking their stand on the antislavery ground they had sowed for decades” as both enslaved and free women. Mary S. Peake was one such woman.⁶⁴

Black Virginians, most visibly those in the cities of Hampton and Norfolk, both enslaved and free, had been striving to secure and define their freedom for generations. They took advantage of the unique intermingled society of slave and free, white and black, and the space it

⁶⁴ Glymph, *The Women's Fight: The Civil War Battle for Home, Freedom, and Nation*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2019), 116.

afforded them.⁶⁵ As historian Tommy L. Bogger highlights, at least 39 percent of enslaved people who were manumitted between 1791 and 1820, were those who “painstakingly [saved] money to purchase their freedom or the freedom of a loved one.”⁶⁶ Over time, despite colonization efforts and many proposals to remove free Blacks from the state, free Black men and women came to own land and property and could move around the city fairly freely, holding craft and artisanal jobs. Enslaved people, though near, and in a community with, free Blacks, could not legally be emancipated without the permission of the state legislature.⁶⁷ Thus, those who were free sought to purchase their family members as slaves of their own, where they could not be liberated out of slavery. None of this indicates that slavery was “better” in this region, but rather, illuminates the interconnectedness of the enslaved and free communities, as well as their interdependent experiences and fates. It was this dynamic community that “provided the nucleus for the [wartime and] postbellum free Black community that evolved.”⁶⁸

It was in this context that Mary Smith Kelsey, known by her marital name, that Mary S. Peake, was born in 1823, to a European father and free Black mother.⁶⁹ From the age of six to sixteen, Mary resided in Alexandria, under the care of her aunt, Mary Paine, so that she could enroll in the “colored school.” There she learned under the tutelage of first a Black, and then a

⁶⁵ Robert F. Engs argues that particularly in Hampton, Virginia, the free black community was comprised predominantly of “mulattos” who shared the last names of their white family members, lived near them, and maintained “cordiality” across these racial lines. He argues that this context afforded “free blacks and slaves... more privileges than were common in the antebellum South.” Robert F. Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation: Black Hampton Virginia, 1861-1890*, (New York: Fordham University, 2004), 8

⁶⁶Tommy L. Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1790-1860: The Darker Side of Freedom*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 14.

⁶⁷ Bogger, *Darker Side of Freedom*, 33; Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation*, 8.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ There is some uncertainty about her father’s country of origin, Robert Engs suggest that he was French and had taken Mary’s mother, Sarah, to France to get married, due to Virginia’s law illegalizing interracial marriage. Lewis Lockwood, who knew and worked with Peake, described her father as an Englishman. Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation*, 9; Lewis C. Lockwood, “Mary S. Peake: The Colored Teacher at Fortress Monroe,” in Lewis Lockwood, *Two Black Teachers During the Civil War*, (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1989), 5.

white teacher, acquiring skills in reading, writing, and needlework.⁷⁰ After returning to Norfolk, Peake worked as a seamstress and became active in her community as a teacher and founder of the *Daughters of Zion*, a benevolent society that tended to the sick and poor of the city. After marrying Thomas Peake, a formerly enslaved man, in the late 1840s, they moved to Hampton where they both lived and worked for the rest of their lives. Mary's mother, Sarah, came with them and eventually married Thompson Walker, a former slave who went on to become an active spokesperson for the freed people after the Civil War.

Mary used her education to educate free and enslaved Blacks, opening a school in Hampton long before the AMA reached Southern soil. Peake taught them to read, write, and the fundamentals of arithmetic. Peake's school in the antebellum context, was a radical seizure of Black freedom, particularly as such an act had been made illegal in 1849. According to "Article 30" in the *Code of Virginia*, "every assemblage of negroes for the purpose of instruction in reading or writing... shall be an unlawful assembly," for which the "negro... [could] be punished with stripes."⁷¹ Lewis Lockwood romanticized Peake's brave choice describing her "shrewdness" and the "divine protection" that helped her elude "the vigilance of conservators of the slave law..."⁷²

By the time shots were fired on Fort Sumter, Mary S. Peake had been working as a teacher in the community for twenty-three years. Her home, where she usually taught, was burned down in the summer of 1861 during "The Burning of Hampton," by enraged Confederates and former white residents of the town. She, her family, and all of the surviving residents (all free

⁷⁰At this time, Alexandria was part of the District of Columbia and did not adhere to the Black Codes of Virginia, meaning that education of free black children was not prohibited. It is likely that this is why Peake's parents sent her to Alexandria for an education. Lockwood, "Mary S. Peake: The Colored Teacher at Fortress Monroe," 7.

⁷¹"Assembling of Negroes," in *The Code of Virginia: with the Declaration of Independence and Constitution of the United States and the Declaration of Rights and Constitution of Virginia*, (Richmond: William F. Ritchie, Public Printer, 1849), 747.

⁷²Lockwood, "Mary S. Peake: The Colored Teacher at Fortress Monroe," 15.

blacks and “contraband”) were evacuated to Fortress Monroe.⁷³ No time passed before some formerly enslaved children visited Peake to ask “her to teach them as she had taught the children in Hampton.”⁷⁴ Within days, Peake’s students numbered over fifty. The fact that these children knew to ask for Peake shows that she was deeply embedded in the free and enslaved communities of Hampton, as an educator and someone committed to the expansion of Black freedom. Her fierce commitment to the cause is further evidenced by the fact Peake began her free school independently as a volunteer until Lewis Lockwood asked the AMA to support her financially.⁷⁵

While Peake never enunciated it for herself, looking at her actions it is clear that she believed education was a key component of freedom, to the extent that she broke the law to educate enslaved people before the war. During the war itself, Peake took her commission further, opening evening classes for adults, believing that “great improvements could be made among” them.⁷⁶ Building freedom was not simply a wartime opportunity or an abstract idea, but one that she knew could change the lives of the newly freed people in tangible ways.

Unlike the Northern Black women who traveled south, all of whom were single, in their twenties, and without children, Peake was married and had two children, setting her even further apart from the Northern contingent. But Peake was emblematic of Southern Black women’s efforts, both free and enslaved, to secure and define freedom. She sought education for herself, and her family, and used it to uplift her enslaved kin; she gave her own home to the cause,

⁷³ Fortress Monroe was a military base that remained under Union control even while the rest of Virginia had seceded. It headquartered the Union Department of Virginia and North Carolina, and became a hub for “contraband,” very early on in the progression of the war. Black men, women and children who arrived at Union lines were transformed from “fugitives,” under the contentious Fugitive Slave Law, to “contraband” under the first and second Confiscation Acts of 1861 and 1862.

⁷⁴ Lockwood, “Mary S. Peake,” 29-30.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 31.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 34.

teaching on the first floor and residing upstairs. She used the resources she had, sacrificing wages and her own safety (before the war) to bring one facet of freedom to the people.

Though Peake died early in the war, February 1862, and did not get to see the fruits of her long-term labor, the arc of her antislavery efforts was mirrored in other Black Southern women. She served as one of the foundational contributors to the “antislavery ground” of Norfolk, Hampton, and Fortress Monroe, Virginia. In these places many formerly enslaved women went on to serve the AMA as teachers or aids to Northern missionary teachers, building upon the foundations Peake had laid. Sallie Daffin noted that many women who attended evening school did so, so that they might become teachers themselves, demonstrating their commitment to becoming agents of freedom for more than themselves.⁷⁷

* * *

The time the five Black missionary women spent among the freed people in Norfolk, Virginia quickly revealed to them the demanding nature of securing Black freedom. Their excitement about freed people’s interest in education gradually became exhaustion; their high ideology became more pragmatic, the task more urgent, and their self-positioning as examples to the freed people became humbler. As missionary teachers, most of their time was spent in the schoolhouse and visiting families, both of which they commented on in their letters to George Whipple throughout the summer, fall, and winter of 1864 and early 1865. These experiences

⁷⁷ Lucinda Spivey was one such woman, who attended an AMA school in Norfolk and went on to serve as a teacher throughout the Reconstruction era. Spivey is referenced in the letters of Charles P. Day, as a member of his classes who swiftly became an aid. She was also seemingly embroiled in a relationship with Thomas De Saliere an Oberlin graduate and AMA prodigy from their antebellum missions to Mendi, who was denied his request to marry her. The reasons for this denial are unknown, but Saliere was swiftly removed from the field; DeBoer, *His Truth is Marching On*, 42.

culminate in two women leaving the field due to ill health, one left for a period of rest, and another departed to return to school. The limited time spent in Norfolk by each of these women points to the strenuous nature of the work, the many epidemics that racked overpopulated contraband towns, and the strain of interracial missionary work.⁷⁸

Blanche Harris arrived first, writing her first letter from Norfolk in January 1864, wherein she revealed her and Professor Woodbury's belief that more "colored teachers" were needed, and requested Clara Duncan be sent to assist her.⁷⁹ By this time, there were already several schools in existence in Norfolk, but the demand far outstripped the supply. Perhaps as a result of Harris' letter, the Association dispatched Daffin, Highgate, Stanley, and Duncan to meet the need. Daffin, Highgate, and Duncan all worked under Harris (Stanley worked at a different school) for a short period before illness drove Harris to take a break, and Mrs. Smith, a white missionary, took her place. Around the same time, the AMA moved Daffin to a different school where its leading teacher was also absent due to illness..

Prior to these bouts of sickness, by March 14th, Daffin had been in Norfolk just a week when she learned of Woodbury's plan for her to join Harris in pioneering the new all-Black faculty school. Daffin agreed to be a part of it because "the field is a large one and we thought we could accomplish more good" by opening a new school. Indeed, a new school proved necessary as within two days the school had enrolled 137 students.⁸⁰ By the end of March, Harris

⁷⁸ Jim Downs highlights the way in which illness and outbreaks of small pox occurred repeatedly throughout the Civil War among the freed people due to destitution, constantly "confronting harsh climate changes" and overpopulation. The missionary women lived and worked among the people thus were not protected from such illnesses, alongside simple exhaustion from the climate and hard work. Jim Downs, *Sick From Freedom: African American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 23; Harris to Whipple, February 1864, AMAA.

⁷⁹ Woodbury and many other officials in the AMA believed that starting a school with an all Black faculty could serve as an example of the capabilities of Black people to lift themselves out of poverty thus tackling notions of Black inferiority. However, rumour spread quickly that the Black missionaries opened their own school because the Black and white missionaries could not work together. DeBoer, *His Truth is Marching On*, 47.

⁸⁰ Sallie Daffin to George Whipple, March 14 1864, Norfolk Virginia, AMAA.

reported that it already had 230 pupils, all of whom were taught by the “most excellent ladies.” Simultaneously, Sara Stanley’s classroom filled quickly; she had 60 pupils within days of opening her school.⁸¹ The interest in education expressed by the freed peoples’ high attendance rate pleased the missionaries, leading Harris to inform Whipple that they had opened a day and evening school to accommodate both parents and children who sought education.⁸²

The interest of the newly freed did not abate. The school quickly became too overcrowded to manage. Between the sustained arrival of newly free people and the repeated absences of missionaries who got sick, the women found themselves stretched thin. The school at Rope-Walk became a source of much concern to Clara Duncan. Rope-Walk was a chaotic entry camp where new arrivals were held until Union officials ascertained which camps could contain them. By the summer of 1864 Daffin reported that “the influx of freed people... has been great,” and while she rejoiced at witnessing the reunion of families who had been separated for years, Clara Duncan was overwhelmed. The consistent arrival of new people made it impossible to discern whether students were doing well. She believed it was “not prospering,” because students “stay so short a time, and others are constantly coming.” In addition, because those who arrived had various experiences of learning, Duncan struggled to teach classes filled with students with such different competency levels.⁸³ Clara was not wrong. Highgate visited the Rope-Walk shortly after she arrived at the end of March and reported the arrival of “some five hundred newly freed people” on that day alone. The location of the school had a fundamental impact on its success. By January 1865 Daffin wrote to Whipple celebrating the prosperity of the Infant

⁸¹ Blanche Harris to George Whipple, March 30 1864, Norfolk, Virginia, AMAA; Sara G. Stanley to George Whipple, April 28 1864, Norfolk Virginia, AMAA.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Clara Duncan, “Freedmen, July 1864” in *AMA Magazine*, Vol. VIII, No. 10, July 1864, in Britton, “Letters from Four Antebellum Black Women,” 394.

School in Norfolk, but could not say the same of the school at Rope-Walk which she described as merely being “in a state of progression.”⁸⁴ Successful teaching required more organization and consistency than the school at Rope-Walk could offer the women. Thus, the freed people’s eagerness to learn and the missionaries’ determination to teach often met the immovable obstacle of chaotic conditions that were not conducive to successful learning.

The frequency of missionaries’ falling ill made for even more challenging conditions. A month after Daffin wrote about the limited success of the Rope-Walk school, Duncan had become increasingly overwhelmed. In a letter published in the AMA Magazine, Clara reported that many schools had closed due to the illness of several teachers in the area, which meant that her already overcrowded classrooms received even more students. The eagerness of the newly freed to learn, meant that “as soon as one [school] closes, they go to another,” thus the number of scholars attending her school had increased way beyond its capacity. Though Duncan was overworked and overwhelmed she expressed that “the children [were] so eager to learn... they beg[ed] so hard” that she had “not had the heart to send them away.”⁸⁵ Despite the unsustainable conditions, Duncan’s commitment to the freed people led her to press on.

Throughout 1865 and beyond these missionary women reported that interest in day and evening schools only increased. Duncan noted that their interest was “great if not greater than that which characterized last year.”⁸⁶ By February 1865, Duncan was spent. She shared with Whipple that her school (now in Whitehead Farms, Virginia) had grown yet again. Not only did Duncan face an exhausting teaching load, her time outside of the classroom was spent visiting families and writing letters for the free women and Black soldiers.⁸⁷ Unsurprisingly, Duncan’s

⁸⁴ Sallie Daffin to George Whipple, January 1 1865, Norfolk, Virginia, AMAA.

⁸⁵ Duncan, “Freedmen, July 1864.”

⁸⁶ Daffin to Whipple, January 1 1865, Norfolk, Virginia, AMAA.

⁸⁷ Clara Duncan to George Whipple, February 28, 1865, Whitehead Farms, Virginia, AMAA.

resignation letter came a month later. Her school had continued to grow and though it brought her “real pain” to leave the children who “have so warmed themselves to my heart,” she wanted to return to school. In Duncan’s opinion, her experience among the freed people revealed to her that she needed to be “better qualified to assist my people to rise from the depths of darkness in which they have been dragged by slavery...”⁸⁸

After almost a year of service on the frontlines of securing Black freedom, Duncan saw that her education and grit were not the only qualifications needed to be an aid to the freed people. While she did not express what skills would make her “better qualified to assist [her] people,” it is evident that her abolitionist ideals were not the only requirement for the task of making Black freedom. Based on her experiences, it is clear that Duncan did not mean that her people were unwilling or impossible to help, but the conditions to which they had been subjected as enslaved people, and now a free lower class, had to be addressed before the definitions of freedom, sought by missionaries and freed people alike, could be central to the mission. Duncan returned to Oberlin and renewed her studies. She never returned to the field but went to work for James Monroe, the Ohio Senator, as a domestic servant.⁸⁹ While education was not just a facet of freedom prized by these abolitionist women but also by the free people themselves, it is clear that the chaos of Union occupation did not promote their success. Thus the abolitionist ideal of providing education was not misguided, nor was it a mismatch with the hopes of the people, it simply required a more stable foundation of freedom, including good living conditions and a consistent place to call home, to be established first.

Duncan’s AMA tenure was short but provides a glimpse into the chaos and the impossibly high demand of missionary work. The work was taxing and she realized she was not

⁸⁸ Clara Duncan to George Whipple, April 1, 1865, AMAA.

⁸⁹ Britton, “Letters from Four Antebellum Black Women,” 26.

suited to the task. After almost a year, Duncan's hopes of being a freedom builder who could "endure a great deal," were shattered by the rigor of the missionary work to the freedmen.⁹⁰ She was not alone in this. For Blanche Harris, her strenuous efforts resulted in severe illness and an eight-month leave. Edmonia Highgate was forced to return to New York in October 1864 after the strain caused an "aberration of the mind." Each of these women learned that heart for the cause of the freed people and their belief in the ideals of antislavery and egalitarianism was not enough fuel to sustain them in the harsh reality of the missionary field.

The destitution the Black missionary women witnessed also proved the necessity for basic provisions if securing freedom was to be possible. Before imparting the mental and moral uplift they had idealized their freedom work to be, the people needed clothes. Seeing the destitution of the many thousands of contrabands, the Black missionary women sought to meet their material needs. Edmonia Highgate wrote to George Whipple on March 30th, 1863, about the destitution at Rope Walk. During her visit, she spoke with the freed people, several of whom told her they would "rather be free even if they were in rags and out of doors." She was "delighted with the work" and felt even more prepared to work "where the monster of slavery has its grave."⁹¹ But, having now encountered the reality of poverty and need, Highgate was forced to reexamine the practical nature of the work.

Moved by their poverty and determination to be free, Highgate decided to "write to two sewing circles to forward [her] boxes of clothing to relieve the want."⁹² Harris and Daffin both wrote to inform Whipple that "the colored ladies have united with us in establishing a sewing circle," "the object of which is to provide clothing for the poor of their city." Not only did free

⁹⁰ Duncan to Whipple, Feb 24 1864.

⁹¹ Highgate to Whipple, March 30, 1864.

⁹² Highgate to Whipple, March 30, 1864, Norfolk, Virginia, AMAA.

and formerly enslaved women ally to sew, they also visited the families to find those in the greatest need and ascertain what the newly freed needed most.⁹³ The impetus for Highgate's letter to Northern aid agencies came because the need so far outstripped the supply that the "colored ladies" efforts, alongside the contributions of the AMA, could not suffice.⁹⁴

The dearth of clothing required a coordinated solution, thus Highgate did not write of the need for clothing alone. She, Daffin and Harris wrote looked for support in supplying the material needs of the freed people. They wrote of the sewing circle started by local free "colored ladies," which allowed Harris to request "material to work with: needles, thread, scissors, and cloth," rather than for made clothes to be sent. The lack of clothing prevented many from attending school which inhibited their larger goal of successfully educating the freed people.⁹⁵ The women writing to Whipple on the same day suggests that it was an orchestrated effort to emphasize the gravity of the destitution. By highlighting the gratitude of the enslaved, as well as the industry of the local Black community to supply the need, each letter pulled on the sensibilities of the AMA senior staff who firmly believed the freed people would (and should) prove themselves. AMA authorities believed that if the formerly enslaved people were treated

⁹³ Blanche Harris to Whipple, March 30th Sallie Daffin to Whipple, March 30th, Norfolk Virginia, AMAA

⁹⁴ The scale of this destitution was a result of the determination of enslaved women, men and children, from near and far to secure freedom behind Union lines. The bustling city was filled with over 10,000 enslaved refugees from March 1862, after the Confederates fled the city due to Union victory. The city quickly became a contraband camp for those who had been evacuated from nearby Craney Island, as well as those who came from the Virginia countryside or had traversed the "Great Dismal Swamp" in the hopes of reaching Union occupied cities in Virginia. This location was not a farming site like other Union occupied locations throughout the South, but rather a city wherein the work available for the newly freedpeople included working for the Union army maintaining railroad lines, working for the quartermaster, or nursing in the hospitals in Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Newport News. Those who worked for the Union often went unpaid and lived in severe poverty. Further, their safety remained insecure due to some Union soldiers who acted as slave catchers for slaveowners, pocketing the reward money; military officials often removed the "contraband" to rural abandoned plantations to prevent idleness, leaving them vulnerable to recapture; and the constant threat of Confederate attack. It was in this insecure context that saw continual change and instability, that Harris, Duncan, Daffin, and Stanley sought to build their visions of freedom into a reality. The people were moved frequently, struggling to survive and provide for themselves and their families, and to realize their own ideas of freedom. Cassandra L. Newby-Alexander, *An African American History of the Civil War in Hampton Roads*, (Charleston: The History Press, 2010), 44; *Ibid*,44-45; Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 61-62.

⁹⁵ Daffin, to Whipple, March 30, 1864; Harris to Whipple, March 30, 1864.

“kindly and justly” they would “prove valuable, happy, and contented citizens.”⁹⁶ Their letters emphasized, perhaps intentionally, this ideology, on behalf of the free people.

Two weeks later, Daffin utilized her connections to the Black abolitionist networks in her hometown of Philadelphia to try to get even more support. In a letter to Elisha Weaver, the editor of *The Christian Recorder*, Daffin painted a devastating scene. There was “much physical suffering,” she reported, and “much need of clothing.” Every day a pupil asked for “articles as are really necessary to shield them from the severity of the weather,” but because the missionaries could not provide them, they were “obliged to turn them from us.”⁹⁷ But, Sallie pined:

*There is many a garment cast aside by our friends of the North as useless, which, if we could but get, would be a means of comfort to the Freedmen of this place, and would bring joy and gladness to many hearts. It is hoped that some of our kind friends... will exercise that benevolent spirit which has always characterized them... and send us something toward supplying the wants of these dear unfortunate ones.*⁹⁸

Daffin hoped that her abolitionist connections could be used to attain help for building freedom in the South. Thus, she turned to the *Recorder* to illuminate the realities of making freedom. Her abolitionist audience with whom she shared the same objectives, anticipated freedom building as their ability to educate the former slaves. Sallie understood that she needed to convey the realities of what antislavery and freedom making required, issuing a different call to arms than those in the North likely expected.

⁹⁶ Lewis Tappan, in DeBoer, *His Truth is Marching On*, 6.

⁹⁷ Sallie Daffin, “An Important Letter from a Teacher of the Freedmen, April 16, 1864, Norfolk Virginia, in *The Christian Recorder*, accessed via: www.accessible.com, March 2021.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

The depths of poverty she witnessed disturbed Highgate. On April 30th, 1864, she wrote to Whipple that after “prayerfully considering the matter,” she had decided that she would take her small salary “and appropriate it to... some of the demands for shoes and clothing which come from the worthy poor.”⁹⁹ A month later, she wrote to her minister, Michael Strieby, who seemingly discouraged her from using her salary to furnish the freed people with clothing and shoes, offering instead to send whatever was needed. She requested fifty dollars’ worth of calico cloth and assured him that “the destitute have, of their own accord, offered to pay for articles we expected freely to give.”¹⁰⁰ Looking at Highgate’s letters in chronological order, her increasing urgency is evident in her tone. The more she saw, the more she was discouraged by the desperation of the newly freed and the inability of freedom-building to move past basic needs. These needs only increased. The women learned to juggle the work of teaching with the more pressing work of fundraising and bringing aid to the formerly enslaved. Their ideals of ushering in new enlightenment were replaced by their efforts to meet the never-ending demands of basic survival.

* * *

While these missionary women were challenged by the harsh realities of building freedom, they also encountered the vivacity of slave religion. Harris, Daffin, Highgate, and Stanley each foregrounded religion and their hope of imparting salvation to the formerly

⁹⁹ Highgate closed this letter stating that she feared she might not be able to continue in the work after six months. It is possible that this fear, alongside just how deeply the sights of destitution seemed to affect her, that her suggestion to use her salary to relief the freed people, is the first glimpse of the mental strain she was experiencing that would lead to her being escorted North in October. Edmonia Highgate to George Whipple, April 30, 1864, Norfolk, Virginia, AMAA.

¹⁰⁰ Edmonia Highgate to Michael Strieby, May 19, 1864, Portsmouth, Virginia, AMAA.

enslaved in their letters of application and early reports from the mission field. Evidently, the women expected to meet newly freedpeople who were not only illiterate but also deprived of spiritual and religious knowledge. Much to their surprise, especially Daffin and Highgate's, the newly freedpeople had robust religious beliefs that had been stewarded by the "invisible institution" for generations.¹⁰¹

Edmonia Highgate expressed her religious priorities in a letter to S.S. Jocelyn in which she accepted her position with the AMA. She shared that, though she expected to work as a teacher and was highly qualified as such, she would "prefer to go as a missionary."¹⁰² In this the age of evangelistic missions to Africa and the Caribbean, Highgate's self-identity as a missionary rather than a teacher, reveals the significance of the spiritual aspect of her work (to Highgate herself), and her perception of the formerly enslaved as those without religion. Similarly, Sara Stanley was determined to go South to bring "moral and intellectual salvation" to "these ignorant and degraded people; children of a beneficent Father, and heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven."¹⁰³ Further, Stanley believed that "an inscrutable providence," she wrote, had a "destiny far greater and more glorious" than people could see. She envisaged a future freedom for the formerly enslaved that included "intellectual power and spiritual greatness, of holiness perfected in the fear of God."¹⁰⁴ Blanche Harris saw herself in a similar way, praying that she could lead them in behavior but praying, more earnestly, for her hard work and example to be "rewarded by seeing

¹⁰¹ The "Invisible Institution" was the hidden church of the enslaved in the antebellum South. Because enslaved people were not legally allowed to gather, and were also consistently fed pro-slavery sermons by white ministers, those who practiced Christianity sought to gather in secret to worship and hear from their community appointed preachers. Gathering in woods during the night, utilizing pots, pans, sheets, Albert Raboteau argues that the enslaved had vibrant religious lives prior to emancipation and the ability to form black churches. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978),

¹⁰² Highgate to Jocelyn, January 1864, AMAA.

¹⁰³ Stanley to Whipple, January 1864, AMAA.

¹⁰⁴ Stanley to Whipple, March 1864, AMAA.

some of my little ones give their hearts to the Savior.”¹⁰⁵ Evidently, these women saw the formerly enslaved as those without religion or as “simple Christians” who needed spiritual uplift, which these religiously educated could impart. However, as they worked and lived among the newly freed, they began to encounter the unique religious expression of the former slaves, which humbled some of the missionaries.

Sallie Daffin is the clearest example of this transformation. Although we do not have her application letter, her early letters from Norfolk, Virginia, reveal that she shared the same ideas as her counterparts, but quickly gained humility. In an early letter, she expressed that their “moral and religious character” was “as far as perceptible... generally good.”¹⁰⁶ She and the other missionaries were “frequently astonished at the meek Savior-like disposition which characterizes many of them.” This surprised Daffin because there was “much physical suffering,” and yet “it is seldom we hear any murmuring or repining against the dispensations of Providence.” Instead, she encountered expressions of “implicit trust in ‘Him who doeth all things well,’ and a willingness to wait on the Lord and his appointed time.”¹⁰⁷ Daffin’s surprise demonstrates that she, too, expected to find the formerly enslaved people without much religious knowledge or spiritual life, let alone firm trust in a provident God. Learning this did not mean she no longer cared about the spiritual dimension of her work. She wrote several times of her belief that God would use her, and other missionaries’ “instrumentality” for conversions, so that He would be “glorified” and they “satisfied” in their efforts.¹⁰⁸ However, it is clear that she quickly garnered respect for the newly freed people’s religiosity. She came to understand that

¹⁰⁵ Blanche V. Harris to George Whipple, February 1864, Norfolk, Virginia, AMAA.

¹⁰⁶ Daffin to Whipple, March 30, 1864.

¹⁰⁷ Daffin, “Important Letter from a Teacher of the Freedmen,” *The Christian Recorder*, April 16, 1864, accessed via: [accessible.com](https://www.accessible.com), March 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Sallie Daffin to George Whipple, August 1, 1864, Norfolk, Virginia, 1864, AMAA.

they did not *all* need her encouragement to faith, but, rather, could benefit from learning to read Scripture.

Edmonia Highgate's self-identity as a missionary shifted more dramatically than Daffin's after encountering the faith of the formerly enslaved. She came to see herself as one who could learn from their religion. Highgate appears to have been an extremely empathic young woman as she reported being deeply moved, and sometimes disturbed, by what she saw among the freedpeople. In her first few weeks of service, visiting those who had recently arrived at Rope Walk, she declared she had "never felt so intensely as when listening to their expressions of joy at being the nation's freedmen."¹⁰⁹ By June 1864, Highgate had been so moved by "such peculiar crushing emotions," that she described them as "the most earnest moments of [her] existence." She had been "near to so many people who have spent most of manhood and womanhood in slavery," who had "weighty sorrow" but expressed deep joy and hope. Not only did the experience leave her with "such deep compelling motive," it pushed her to do everything in her power to help them. Their faith had made her their student.

She recounted the stories of women who challenged her faith. An elderly woman whose children had been sold away, rejoiced in the knowledge that they would be reunited in heaven. Another rejoiced "that Jesus was willing to receive her still," after avoiding church due to inadequate clothing. Her dense three-page letter overflowed with her awe at their faith, hope, and trust in God. One elderly man refused to pray for freedom, but his hope "for the Lord to do His will," astounded her that she asked the old man to pray for the missionaries. She longed to be like him, patient in suffering and able to "perform acceptably [her] work," despite the suffering he encountered. Though Highgate had set out to be primarily a missionary, she quickly learned

¹⁰⁹ Edmonia Highgate to George Whipple, March 30, 1864, Norfolk, Virginia, AMAA.

that “these untutored children... have been made patient by suffering” and were “so full of faith” that they had “taught [her] a most important lesson.”¹¹⁰ It is possible that Highgate’s receptivity to the religiosity of the formerly enslaved people, and her growing humility, came from her Transcendentalist ideas which prized “personal and subjective religious experience.”¹¹¹

Contrastingly, Sara G. Stanley did not shift in her haughty self-identity as a religious and intellectual superior of the formerly enslaved. Her unwavering superiority was likely due to her deep commitment to Presbyterianism, a denomination committed to Christian orthodoxy, and her family’s membership in the Black elite class. After only a month of working among the freed people, Stanley believed that she more fully understood the position of the missionary. She remarked that the missionary: had to have “hearts filled with the sanctifying love of Christ and rich in the graces of the Holy Spirit” because, “God has committed to... the missionary teachers, the future of these people.” The “destiny of immortal souls” was in the missionaries’ hands. Further, she believed their “plastic minds” would be “molded... for good or for evil,” by missionaries’ influence, seeing them as children “to be led in the paths of righteousness.” Although Stanley shared this realization in order to explain her understanding of the gravity of the missionary task, and her sheer dependence on God, it is evident that her time among the freed people did not change her perception of herself as their religious superior, but, rather, emboldened her. Stanley’s experiences among the freed people further convinced her that she was the righteous steward of their spiritual, intellectual, and moral uplift.

Stanley’s vision of the missionary project was not uncommon, but, rather, was found among the majority of white Northern missionaries. Historian Elizabeth Jemison argues that paternalistic ideas of race marked the work of many AMA missionaries, which allowed many to

¹¹⁰ Edmonia Highgate to George Whipple, June 1, 1864, Norfolk, Virginia, AMAA.

¹¹¹ Wirzbicki, *Fighting for the Higher Law*, 2.

celebrate the religious commitments of the former slaves while questioning their ability and readiness to be equal citizens.¹¹² Although Stanley moved through the world as a Black woman, it is evident that she understood herself to be distinctly separate from the newly freedpeople, seeing them as children to be raised up by herself and other missionaries who were “opening their darkened intellects” to the “light of knowledge.” Her unification of intellect and spirituality was likely a result of her Presbyterianism, a denomination mainly comprised of the “articulate Black elite.”¹¹³ This was also likely the reason that she was not wooed by the spiritual expressions offered by the formerly enslaved. Class clearly shaped her impressions of the freedpeople. Though raised in the South, in proximity to enslavement, Sara was three generations removed from enslavement (much like Charlotte Forten), and was the product of enormous wealth, racial ambiguity, and status. Indeed, her family chose not to pass, but she still benefitted from the wealth her white great-grandfather left to her grandfather.

The shifting of Daffin and Highgate’s self-identities as missionaries, to a position of spiritual reciprocity, demonstrates yet another way in which the freedpeople reshaped abolitionist ideals. The formerly enslaved proved to have their own longstanding understanding of God and deep faith in Him, one the Black missionary women and their own frameworks of religion could not entirely overlook. What becomes apparent in both Daffin and Highgate’s altered perspectives, is the vivacity of the religious identities and cosmology of the enslaved. Much like they entered the antislavery ground established by enslaved and local free people, their missional intentions met a well-developed religious world. This religion shaped how the newly freed

¹¹² Elizabeth L. Jemison, *Christian Citizens: Reading the Bible in Black and White in the Postemancipation South*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2020), 31.

¹¹³ Willard B. Gatewood Jr., “John Francis Cook, Antebellum Black Presbyterian,” *Presbyterian Historical Society*, Vol 67, No 3, (1989), 221.

understood the world around them and informed the freedom they hoped for, in a way that the missionaries did not expect.

* * *

Besides the toil of the work itself, some of their white missionaries counterparts made their work harder. Although they were all employed by the AMA which boasted antislavery, anti-emigration, pro-Black citizenship ideals, Stanley, Highgate, and Duncan all complained of the racism some of their white counterparts. Their complaints give some insight into the strained dynamics between Black and white missionaries who understood themselves to be motivated by the same antislavery ideals. Examining these complaints further reveals the depth of these women's Black abolitionist thought and their expectations of Black freedom for themselves and the formerly enslaved. Perhaps, overlooked by their white counterparts, making freedom, to these women, had as much to do with affirming and claiming Black dignity and equality, as it did education. In this "New Jubilee," these women unexpectedly found themselves needing to advocate for both their and the freedpeoples' freedom from racial hierarchy.

An incident in the summer of 1864 exemplifies the realities of the way racism appeared in Mission Houses in Norfolk, Virginia. That summer, Samuel Walker, a white missionary teacher located elsewhere in Virginia, passed through Norfolk on his way North. Stanley, Highgate, and Duncan were all acquainted with him, so Highgate offered him lodging for the night at the Mission House, seemingly in her room. Missionaries William Coan and Mary Reed, both white, were "highly offended" and objected to Walker racially mixing with Highgate,

especially by staying in her room (presumably by himself).¹¹⁴ Mary Reed was so offended that she wrote George Whipple:

*I remember saying that I came from home expecting to make sacrifices and great ones too for these people but that I did not anticipate living with them as we do here.... Recently, they with their friends have sometimes outnumbered us at the table and assumed so much that I have almost thought that persons who said, 'Give them the opportunity and they will take advantage of your very kindness.' were right.*¹¹⁵

Mary Reed believed and expected missionary work would be pioneered by white Northerners. At the very least, her antislavery did not go so far as an egalitarianism that was comfortable with Black missionaries taking the lead. Reed was suspicious of the Black missionaries and did not desire close proximity to them. Only three days after Reed had written to Whipple, Highgate and Stanley, believing that “when great principles are involved silence is criminal,” penned a complaint of their own. Perhaps not knowing of Reed’s letter, the women focused their complaint on the prejudicial actions of Coan. They suggested that Coan had been hiding his “peculiar secession, proslavery and Christian negro principles and malign prejudices” from Whipple during his visit, but since his departure seemed “to have set aside whatever restraint he may have thought proper to assume.” More specifically, Coan had hidden his “special pleasure in advocating the inferiority of negroes and the necessity of social distinctions with special applications to colored missionary teachers.” They then explained the situation with Samuel Walker, stating that Coan had assumed authority by “forcing an individual's private preferences-

¹¹⁴ Weisenfeld, “‘Who is Sufficient for These Things,’ Sara G. Stanley and the American Missionary Association, 1864-1868,” *Church History*, Vik. 60, No. 4, (December, 1991), 496-497.

¹¹⁵ Mary Reed to George Whipple, 18 July 1864, Norfolk, Virginia, AMAA.

on the ground of her accordance with his own views,” citing his preference to segregate the house even if it meant him sleeping on the floor.¹¹⁶

Their critique did not end there. Coan’s racism, they pointed out, was “doing an incalculable injury to the cause,” which they, as Black women, could “perceive more clearly than others.” They lamented the “deleterious effects of his influence upon this work of elevating God’s poor oppressed and outraged children,” with “the contagion of his example” manifesting in other teachers (likely Mary Reed). While they conceded the “distinctions of Society” in the North and his right to choose his own company, “here, in the missionary field, it is different,” and he had no right to “militate... against the cause he professes to serve.” If left unchecked “he will... carry on his opinions wherever he goes” and destroy “the kindness, forbearance, and love which you have so carefully cultivated among us.” Their compromise with the dynamics of the North, seemingly including abolitionist missionaries, where social integration of the races was not promoted, suggests that they expected to work among the freed people with like-minded people with whom they would consequently have no racial tensions.

Further, to Highgate and Stanley, Coan’s beliefs fundamentally altered his mission. His promotion of segregation and mistreatment of them revived and perpetuated the “prejudice and caste which is the very spirit and essence of slavery.”¹¹⁷ This argument reveals how they defined those who were adequate builders of freedom. To them, it was impossible that anyone who argued for segregation amongst the missionaries, could be on remotely the same commission as they were; freedom builders had to share the egalitarian vision, a notion that was, in reality, not guaranteed amongst white missionaries. One’s “private preference” for segregation, or belief in the inferiority of Black people, fundamentally contradicted the project at hand. Further, their

¹¹⁶Sara G. Stanley and Edmonia Highgate to George Whipple, 21 July, 1864, Norfolk, VA, AMAA.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

assertion that, as Black women, they could better “perceive” the negative impact of his racism on the work, suggests their unspoken experience of other instances of racism that passed by unnoticed and unchallenged by their white peers.

The women expressed their complaints and their extensive ideological underpinnings. Their objections to Coan’s racism were not simply defensive of themselves or the mission to the freed people but were rooted in deeply theological claims. They argued that in their understanding of “the religion of Christ, the brotherhood of man is its fundamental and elementary constituent.” They evidenced this claim using several passages of Scripture including the command to “love one another,” since “He that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love.” They even employed John Brown’s famous quote, stating that the white missionaries needed “to learn the A.B.C. of Christianity.” Thus, a true Christian would live these principles and make them “universal among all those engaged in promoting the moral, mental and spiritual welfare of the freed people,” knowing that doing otherwise was to work for the “advancement of the Kingdom of Satan.”¹¹⁸ This damning critique of Coan reveals the faith tradition both women shared as Black Presbyterian and AME members. The liberationist reading of Scripture was at the core of their egalitarianism, and thus the racism exhibited by Coan was not just an offense to them but to God. In the AMA, an ecumenical and non-sectarian organization, these women had some theological flexibility, but the Bible affirmed dignity of Black people was non-negotiable.

Stanley encountered similar issues with Mrs. Gleason, another white missionary, only a few months later. She, tired of encountering racism among her peers, reported again to Whipple, penning two letters on the same day. In them she lamented the important but “old subject and hackneyed one” that she was forced to keep talking about: “human brotherhood, equal rights, and

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

the unity of all things created in the divine likeness.” While this letter is just as angry and similar to her former complaint, Sara decried those who denied these God-ordained principles and committed the sin of partiality, further showing the theological underpinnings of her egalitarianism.¹¹⁹ Stanley had overheard Gleason saying to a soldier’s wife, “if all colored teachers are not removed from Mission House No. 80, Main Street, she will not return to it,” which Stanley knew could only refer to her even though Gleason did not perceive Stanley as Black until she disclosed it.

While both her insufficient “intellectual training” and her individual ideas might answer for her actions, Gleason’s was a “vile abominable God accursed feeling of hatred.”¹²⁰ In her letter about Coan, she had affirmed his right, if not in the missionary field, to avoid the company of Black men and women if he so preferred. Yet, she maintained:

*the character of nations, communities, societies depend upon the character of individuals composing them, there can be truth, honesty, equity, in the whole, only if these qualities inhere in individuals.*¹²¹

Being in the field, even only for a few months, had shifted Sara’s feelings about individual responsibility and preference markedly. Perhaps she realized how consequential personal preferences could be on the wellbeing of the Black missionaries and the freed people. She had seen what disunity of vision could do to a collective identity and mission. To her, the real freedom and uplift of the newly freed required Black people to be received as equals, a

¹¹⁹ Sara G. Stanley to George Whipple, October 6 1864, Norfolk, Virginia, AMAA. Stanley quotes an excerpt from the passage James 2:9 (KJV), “But if ye have respect to persons, you commit sin, and are convinced of the law as a transgressor.” Sara referenced the latter part of this verse arguing that racism was a form of favoritism that God deemed a sin.

¹²⁰ Stanley erased this particular insult and apologized for them at the end of the letter believing “they hardly show a spirit conformable with the meekness and gentleness of Christ.” Sara G. Stanley to Whipple, October 6 1864, AMAA.

¹²¹ Ibid.

stipulation that her missionary experiences taught her. The tone of her letters regarding these instances of racism are marked by both this conviction, and a sense of its seeming impossibility.

These complaints are only two of many. Even Clara Duncan wrote to Whipple about an unhappy time at the Mission House due to racism. Sending a formal complaint about a person she refused to name, she stated that she had kept quiet but realized that “duty [did not] demand silence.” She was certain Whipple knew the woman who had offended her, thus all she shared was her unwillingness to “live in an unpleasant atmosphere if it can be avoided.” Moreover, that woman who had “no interest in the cause [and] is not the best person to have charge of a Mission House.”¹²² The missionary women were willing to bear much, but these experiences evidently had an exhausting impact upon them.

Blanche Harris and Stanley did not denounce the work of all white missionaries, as they had seen true religion and an ideal freedom builder in the person of Professor William Woodbury. Harris wrote to Whipple of her gratitude for the work of Woodbury who had proven to be a “kind friend to me and my race.”¹²³ A month later, Stanley wrote again to Whipple elaborating further on her comprehensive theology of antislavery and Black freedom. She thanked him for his commitment to the cause and for the “one great power” he possessed: his ability to infuse “a sincere desire to do this work unto the Lord” into the hearts of “lukewarm teachers” of the “Saxon race.” This statement further evidences the unspoken challenges she faced navigating missionary work with her white counterparts. Stanley declared:

*God is man, Christ clothed in the habiliments of flesh, the Son of God in the person of a negro.*¹²⁴

¹²² Clara Duncan to Professor Woodbury, August 29, 1864, Norfolk, Virginia, AMAA.

¹²³ Blanche Harris to George Whipple, March 17 1864, Norfolk, Virginia, AMAA.

¹²⁴ Sara G. Stanley to William Woodbury, 29 August, 1864, Norfolk, Virginia, AMAA.

This theological argument reiterated the views expressed in her letter of application, that, Black people though oppressed by enslavement and “color prejudice,” were made in the image of God. To be made in the image of God was to be human, and to be human, was to be a brother or sister worthy of equality. This assertive statement of Black dignity further demonstrates that Stanley did not see freedom as simply the moral and mental uplift of formerly enslaved peoples, but the claiming and affirming of Black dignity and personhood. As a Black southern woman who rejected a life of white-passing, Stanley knew that enslavement and the systems of racial hierarchy stripped Black people of much more than access to education and the rights of citizens. Her passionate egalitarian rhetoric reveals her understanding of freedom as including Black dignity, affirmed worth, and accepted humanity.

The experiences of Clara Duncan, Blanche Harris, and Edmonia Highgate suggest that racism was more widespread in the AMA. In instances where the AMA was unsupportive of Black women teachers in the field, local Black communities stepped in to help and protect Black women missionaries, including Blanche Harris and Sallie Daffin. When the AMA sent Daffin to North Carolina in 1866, she was refused a room at the AMA Mission House by her white colleagues who felt it would “cause tension.” Instead, Daffin lodged with a local Black family.¹²⁵ Similarly, Blanche Harris, who deployed to Natchez, Mississippi, after the war, despite her desire to return to Norfolk, was forced to move into the Mission House where her white colleagues told her that she “would be obliged to room with two of the domestics, and... must not expect to eat at the first table, and might come into the sitting room sometimes. My room was to be my home.”¹²⁶ In both these instances, the local Black communities did not simply ally with the AMA, but made the work of the AMA possible, demonstrating their commitment to the true

¹²⁵ Weisenfeld, “‘Who is Sufficient for These Things?’ 499.

¹²⁶ Blanche Harris to the AMA, 10 March 1866, AMAA.

allies of freedom. The parts played by Black families and individuals such as these are often invisible in the archival record, even though their contributions made possible some of the more visible freedom-making acts; building freedom was a holistic and ensemble effort during the Civil War.

Another more subtle but systemic manifestation of racism was the commonality of Black women being sent to rural areas of the South. Highgate, and others, were concerned about being sent to dangerous and rural locations with a small number of freed people to teach.

Comparatively, the major towns on the east coast that were densely populated with freedpeople were mostly served by white missionaries, which seemed to be intentional on the part of the AMA. According to Highgate, it was not her “duty to stay here in the woods” teaching thirty-four students when there were schools taught by white teachers with hundreds of freed people. “Colored teachers when imbued with the right spirit and properly qualified [should be] in the front ranks of this work.”¹²⁷ These practices grieved many Black missionaries and put them in precarious positions in the hostile postwar South. It seems that eventually, innumerable complaints spurred a reaction from the Association’s President Lewis Tappan, who wrote plainly that those who could not “conquer their prejudices... evince indisputably that they are unfit for the high and responsible office of superintendent or teacher, and should be dismissed from the post they so unworthily fill.”¹²⁸

The racism of the AMA is not the main point of focus here, but rather the depth of Stanley, Harris, Highgate, and Duncan’s antislavery rebuttals. Each of their objections displayed their expectations of working with people who shared their beliefs and would treat them with

¹²⁷ Edmonia Highgate to George Whipple, 13 April 1864, AMAA.

¹²⁸ Lewis Tappan, “Caste: A Letter to a Teacher Among the Freedmen, New York, 1867,” in DeBoer, “The Role of Afro-Americans in the Origin and Work of the American Missionary Association,” 228.

respect, a notion that was lost on many AMA agents. Stanley's theological vision of Black dignity was a key definition of Black freedom that was further developed by her experiences in the field. Not only did Norfolk, serve as a space of transformation for the newly free, it also became the same for the Black abolitionist women who entered expecting themselves to simply be the agents of transformation.

Additionally, when assessing the major disparity in time served by Black and white women missionaries, these instances of racial prejudice must be considered. The famous white missionary women from the North, like Elizabeth Hyde Botume and Laura Towne, have been highly acclaimed for their decades-long service to the freedpeople, which most Black northern women did not achieve. It is clear that this disparity was not due to lacking dedication or care for the freedpeople, but, rather a result of the racism they faced as part of an interracial aid agency. While white women commanded the respect of their male counterparts and missionaries, Black women were uniquely exposed to racial prejudice, violence, and maltreatment, adding another wearying factor to their missionary service.

Standing to deliver her speech at the Convention in 1864, during her hiatus, Edmonia Highgate recalled scenes of her encounters. The destitution she had seen, ideas shared with other Black women, as well as the racism of the white missionaries all came flooding back. How could she explain all she had witnessed? Especially given that it had disturbed her so much she had to take a leave of absence, a reality she likely pushed to the back of her mind. While it is impossible to concretely measure the experiences of these five women (and the other almost two hundred Black women missionaries) on the front lines of defining and securing Black freedom, added new and crucial perspectives to the movement and its freedom building efforts. Just as they were informed by the stripes they earned in the Black abolitionist movement in the North, they and the

movement were subsequently shaped by their experiences in the field, leading to the deployment of even more Black missionaries throughout the era of Reconstruction in a myriad of service roles. Additionally, their experiences fundamentally transformed those who sought to have an impact on education and the intellectual developments of the freed people, into agents of material improvements that were the cornerstone of securing Black freedom.

These women entered a work already in motion, bringing with them their experiences as free Blacks and their abolitionist ideals of “progress, freedom, elevation, and perfect enfranchisement of the entire colored people.”¹²⁹ As Erica Armstrong Dumbar argues, Black northerners had undergone their very own “rehearsal for reconstruction,” before the Civil War. Thus, arguing their transformation is not to suggest that they had nothing to offer the formerly enslaved, however, this was their first time confronting the institution of slavery and the wounds it had inflicted upon their millions of newly freed brothers and sisters. The women’s feelings of being overwhelmed are palpable in the letters of Highgate and Duncan. Additionally, the unabating work and exhaustion expressed by all the women, are indicative of the scale of the task of making Black freedom. Reaching free soil would not be enough, nor would education. The evils of racialized hierarchies and lack of adequate resources would be battles fought way beyond the Civil War.

¹²⁹ Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, 441.

CHAPTER 4

“I Want to Get a Foundation:” Formerly Enslaved Women’s Efforts to Build Free Homes Behind Union Lines

Hannah sat outside the barrack, which she was making into a home, watching the curious white woman make her way down a main street on Craney Island, Virginia. The woman was visiting the houses of her newly freed neighbors. Hannah listened to the woman chastise those who were enjoying their ‘first free walk,’ for she had assumed they were beggars and vagrants. As the woman approached Hannah’s neighbor, Bettie, to instruct her in some task, Bettie quickly retorted, “oh can't you let me enjoy myself! I've been here three months, and have had no time, till now, to look about the island. Why you make me afraid of you all, and I shan't dare to look about me again.” The white woman recoiled at Bettie’s exasperated outburst and continued down the street looking for another to instruct. Hannah watched as the woman’s gaze reached her and her home. Seeing her approach, Hannah went inside to warn her older sister, Anne, that company was coming and to shuffle the few chairs she had around the dying fire to welcome their surveillant guest. “Hello! May I enter,” a voice called from outside; “yes, miss,” Hannah said as she opened the door. Again, Hannah watched as the missionary’s eyes scanned her home, taking in every corner, her lip curling at what Hannah assumed was the dust that was impossible to keep out of the draughty barracks. Hannah flushed with shame, and Annie could only look into the fire’s dwindling glow. As the woman looked around, asking questions about every item of furniture or kitchenware, Hannah began to cough, a cough that had been worsening for weeks now. “Oh what a bad cough you have,” said the missionary, to which Hannah had little to say.

But, Anne, visibly irritated by the missionary's meaningless comment, retorted, "she wouldn't have a cough if she had some shoes!" Shocked by Anne's frustration, the missionary bristled at Hannah and Annie's lack of gratitude for her good intentions. She then bustled out of their home apologizing for the discord she sowed, and for "mar[ing] the picture" of their home.¹

* * *

Hannah, Bettie, and Anne each illuminate the myriad ways Black women sought to build free home lives. After running from plantations and facing the gendered challenges of surviving Union occupation, formerly enslaved women strived to build and protect homes for themselves and their kin. I define and explore "home" in several ways throughout this chapter. First, embodied by Hannah's wish for her draughty barrack to be more presentable than what the missionary witnessed, "home" refers to the physical places Black women resided in throughout the war. Shelter was typically scarce and insufficient throughout Union occupied locations, but Black women made efforts to transform mere shelters into habitable spaces they took pride in.

Simultaneously, "home" refers to Black women's autonomy over their lives that would allow them to make different choices. While Bettie once would have been obliged to obey the white missionary's instruction, she instead rejected the missionary's meddling and demanded to be left alone. Enslavement and the omnipotence of white rule had long displaced the Black women's personal autonomy. Thus, Black women, in building free lives, understood that their liberty required reclaiming their authority over their own lives and encouraging that in their kin.

¹ Lucy Chase, April 1, 1863, Craney Island, Virginia, in Henry Swint (ed), *Dear Ones at Home: Letters from Contraband Camps*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1966), 67.

This becomes clear when considering the ways Black women negotiated power relationships with white women missionaries.

Finally, “home,” refers to the efforts Black women made to become at home in their own bodies, even in the presence of white people. Anne willingly challenged the missionary’s self-conceived benevolence, and, where once she would have been obliged to remain silent or feign gratitude, she instead expressed her true thoughts. Not only did Black women begin to express their emotions and preferences around white missionaries; they also made claims to dignity by accepting aid on their own terms and telling stories of their enslavement. Missionary’s accounts of their interactions with newly freed women showcase each of these types of “homemaking” and illuminate the affective and holistic facets of Black women’s freedom.

Black women and men transformed Union lines into free soil and there built free lives. Intended merely for their retention, contraband camps were not imagined as a freedom project. Yet, Black women and men in contraband camps and occupied cities took over the abandoned houses of their enslavers. In addition, Union barracks became their quarters, as well as tents, old slave cabins, and any other shelter they could build for themselves, including palmetto huts. In most places, shelter was scarce and, in many cases, temporary, as the Union held the right to move camps and repurpose buildings for more pressing military needs. For example, from 1862, Craney Island, Virginia, served as a contraband camp. It was inhabited entirely by former enslaved people and missionaries sent to aid their freedom building efforts, only to be evacuated in April 1863 when the Union transformed it into a “Magdalen Camp.” Upon the evacuation of Black families who had been establishing their homes on the island since the occupation of

Norfolk in 1862, one Black woman expressed her frustration at being removed, “I want to get a foundation and go to work.”²

Having a physical space to call home was a foundational stone in building freedom. However, due to the chaos of the Civil War, the unstable nature of Union occupation, and the large numbers of enslaved runaways arriving every day, housing proved to be a consistent challenge throughout Union occupied territories. Despite the dearth of appropriate shelter, and the Union frequently moving camps around, Black women actively tried to build free homes for themselves and their families when and where they could. In New Bern North Carolina, Superintendent to the Freedmen, Reverend Horace James wrote to the AMA headquarters about the destitution of one woman who came to the storehouse asking for “flannel for her sick babe.” James followed her home to confirm her story and found that her “home” was merely “made of... boughs” and that “she and her father had made it, the day before,” to shelter themselves from the heavy rain. Though the shelter was barely sufficient for the woman, her father, and her four children, she explained that she would rather stay there than in the camp, a sentiment James knew to be common among the freedpeople.³ He expressed the need for the government to provide “at least temporary shelter for the crowds,” since the barracks were without a ceiling and the “scenes of suffering... baffle description.”⁴ Whether they chose to stay out of the camps because of the diseases that quickly spread among them, or because of the threat of violence at the hands of unruly Union soldiers, this woman chose to build a home, however limited, away from the myriad of threats she would not tolerate in freedom.

² Lucy Chase, September 30 1863, Craney Island, Virginia, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 89.

³ Horace James to George Whipple, New Bern, North Carolina, September 19 1864, AMA Archives, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana (hereafter AMAA).

⁴ Ibid.

Similarly, in Nashville, Tennessee, a sick woman and her family were found by a missionary to have made their home in a barely habitable and “dilapidated... old log house.” The woman and her family were one of two families to claim the cabin as their home, but while the other family was “tolerably comfortable- or rather, not destitute,” she and hers were not. As the missionary man entered, the sick woman watched as his eyes fell on her “five little children... huddled together in the middle of the floor... without light, fire nor food.” She continued to lie on “the only thing like a bed” that they owned, her body weak from the unknown illness that ravaged her body.⁵ That same day, the male missionary had also seen a family who made home in an “open shed.”⁶ Both this family and those in the log cabin demonstrate what finding housing looked like for most newly freedpeople throughout Union occupation; building home was important but incredibly challenging.⁷ In the Sea Islands, South Carolina, and Norfolk, Virginia, missionaries reported that the most common housing included palmetto huts, barracks constructed by the Union, houses enslavers abandoned, and old slave cabins. Particularly in the Sea Islands, where masters and mistresses abandoned the islands entirely, leaving enslaved people behind, housing was initially more readily available than in other Union occupied locations.

Despite the challenges of building home and their subpar conditions, Black women took pride in their homes. Many Black families would furnish their dwellings with things from the abandoned houses of their owners and other white people. On St. Helena Island, Susannah, a

⁵ Rev. J.G. McKee, “Notes and Incidents from the Diary of Rev. J.G. McKee,” in Ralph W. McGranhan, *Historical Sketches of the Freedmen’s Missions of the United Presbyterian Church, 1862-1904*, (Knoxville: Knoxville College, 1904, 15-16.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ These examples are raised to demonstrate the experience of most Black women, men and children. The opportunity to build home was not a reality for many newly freed throughout the Civil War because Union occupation suffered from a dearth of shelter. Thus, the efforts to create physical spaces that they could call home that are explored in this chapter are not intended to argue these occurrences to be universal for Black people behind Union lines.

Black woman who had been enslaved on the island, began working for the missionaries who had taken up residence on the Oaks plantation. When she was offered money, Susannah refused payment in money, asking instead for “something good from the house,” an arrangement Susannah said she had established with her former owners.⁸ Susannah likely knew that her pay would not provide more for her than missionary aid would supply, and nice furnishings for her home would not be affordable or accessible unless she took them from the “Big House.”

Susannah was not alone in this action. Caroline, a Black woman who had also been enslaved on St Helena Island, proudly welcomed the white missionary into her home because she was proud of its content. After visiting the missionary at her house, Caroline invited her to visit and walked the missionary to the house. Not only were she and her mother “neatly dressed,” the room in which they lived was “elegantly furnished.” It had “straw matting and a mahogany bureau,” all of which Caroline freely admitted were “things that... ‘massa’s’ house had contributed,” after they fled.⁹

Even those who remained in the same slave cabins smuggled things out of the plantation household to furnish those cabins. In Norfolk, Virginia, a missionary complained about this pattern, describing the cabin as their “haystack, and everything that belongs in the house is the pin we must hunt for there.” The Black women and men who served the missionaries as domestic workers kept taking things from the house, starting with the china, then the silver, the saucers, and so on until missionaries had to go looking for them. Often, however, the Black women would not allow them to enter.¹⁰

⁸ Laura M. Towne, April 27 1862, St. Helena Island, S.C., in Rupert Sargent Holland (ed), *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne; Written from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862-1884*, (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1912), 23.

⁹ Towne, April 17, 1862, Beaufort, South Carolina, in Holland, *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne*, 4.

¹⁰ Lucy Chase, September 30, 1863, Craney Island, VA, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 81.

Black women made homes for themselves and their loved ones, moving with the faith that their free lives would be a permanent reality. In their determination to build free homes, they took the furnishings that had been fixtures in the homes of their white owners, items that had, until the war, been out of reach for them. Thus, appropriating these items for their free homes demonstrates their efforts to build homes that reflected their dignity and what they believed they deserved. Doing so was not an effort to mirror white values but to claim valuable property ownership for themselves and to create both comforts for themselves, and pride in the presence of others. Much like their departures from the Confederacy eroded the institution of slavery, claiming symbols of white wealth, which were the product of their labor, furthered the death of the institution.

The ability of many to appropriate their former master's furniture for their own homes illuminates the uniquely dark landscape on which Black women, men, and children sought to build freedom behind Union lines. The formerly enslaved sought to build freedom surrounded by the relics of enslavement. Indeed, Union occupation brought free soil to the South, shortening the fugitive journey by thousands of miles, but claiming freedom in slave territory yielded the unique problem of building freedom in a terrain marked by their enslavement. As historian Kidada Williams argues, "African Americans were free, but.. that freedom, as they envisioned it, was hard to grasp and harder to live in the former slaveholding states."¹¹ Charlotte Forten, a Black missionary from Philadelphia, illuminated this in her vivid description of Beaufort Island, South Carolina, that she published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1864. As Forten waited with her missionary companions for a boat to St Helena Island she observed the beautiful plantation houses, and the Public Library, which enslaved people would likely not have been allowed to

¹¹ Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Violence*, (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 17.

enter, “now a shelter for freed people.” While she enjoyed seeing the abandoned streets, littered only with soldiers and free people, she was also struck by seeing “the market place- in which slaves were sometimes sold.”¹² Though disturbed by the sight of the auction block, Forten claimed that the “evil shadow of slavery no longer” hung over the people. Instead, she saw playful children.¹³

Yet the shadow of slavery loomed large over the free soil of Union occupied territories. For instance, Sallie, walked from the plantation of her enslavement to Union occupied Beaufort, South Carolina, with her grandchild on her back. She spent the night with the missionaries at the plantation house, and there Sallie told them about the “many ghosts” she saw through the night. These ghosts, Sallie indicated, were the hauntings of the abuse she had endured from her master. She recounted that she had lost all her family members except her grandson. She had watched a white man whip her son, which sent her into such a rage that she “flew at him and clutched him by the throat.”¹⁴ Being in a plantation house—any plantation house—triggered memories for Sallie even though she had made it to free soil. Whether the ghosts she saw were renderings of her master’s threatening footsteps, or her countless lost kin, the very house itself presented Sallie with traumatic familiarity.

Sallie was not alone in this reaction to this house. Lorena, who had been enslaved there, was traumatized by her experiences there—a place she still was forced to remain. Lorena told missionaries of the brutality she underwent. It was, she said, “de cruelest place.”¹⁵

Unsurprisingly, Lorena and Sallie were haunted by the “Big House.” The missionary recalled

¹² Charlotte L Forten, “Life on the Sea Islands,” in Lewis C. Lockwood, *Two Black Teachers During the Civil War*, (New York: Arno Press, 1989), 67

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Laura M. Towne, April 14, 1864, St Helena Island, South Carolina, in *The Penn School Papers, Edith M. Dabbs Papers*, Folder 4., Wilson Library, UNC Chapel Hill, 197.

¹⁵ Towne, April 24, 1862, The Oaks, SC, in *The Penn School Papers*, 33.

that the dining room of the house still had the “whipping-post and a pulley for stretching and whipping,” steps away from Rina and Clarissa’s, both newly freed, bedchambers. Both fixtures were torture devices used on them, their kin, or resembled those that had been used on them on the plantations they had fled. Building freedom surrounded by these instruments of violence continued to traumatize Black women despite the absence of their enslavers.

Rachel, another woman enslaved on a different plantation on the island, knew this cruel contradiction in a much more palpable way. Since the islands had been captured in 1862, Rachel’s master had forced her to hide him in the house until late summer 1863. Thus, Rachel had to work to take advantage of the free soil and resources offered by missionaries, to build her free life, whilst sheltering the master of her enslaved life. She continued to experience the plantation house as “de cruelest place,” in ways that had become memories for those around her. While her sentiments about being in this condition for over a year are unknown, it is reasonable to assume that Rachel’s efforts to build her free life were troubled by fear of her master’s sustained authority.

Each of these women’s experiences of the looming specter of enslavement, coupled with others’ efforts to claim furnishing from the “Big House” for their own, highlight the tension that existed while building free homes in Union occupation. Black women made efforts to build homes that were unimaginable during enslavement, despite the instability of Union lines, claiming homes they could be proud of as key foundations of their freedom. Simultaneously, the landscape of enslavement required them to do so by repeatedly confronting its immediate violent past, to transform it into free soil.

* * *

Building free home lives required recalibrating the power dynamics between Black and white women. As defined earlier, “home,” also encompasses Black women’s newfound ability to have autonomy over their own lives and make choices that were authentic to themselves, even in relation to white women. The presence of white missionary women from the North brought Black women into close contact with white women to whom they did not belong, but who sought to instruct Black women in their own ideals of freedom. While these missionaries came with antislavery ideals, “paternalism and racial prejudice were too often present” in agents of northern aid associations.¹⁶ Their diaries and letters reveal a sustained belief in a racial hierarchy that fundamentally shaped their interactions with the freedpeople. Fueled by gendered racial ideologies of their own superiority, many white missionary women entered their supposed mission field, with a staunch belief in their rightful assumption of the dominant position in the power dynamic between themselves and enslaved women.¹⁷ As Thavolia Glymph argues, the plantation household had served as a “site of struggle between [Black and white] women,” since the American slave system allowed race and rank to “overcome the handicap of gender.”¹⁸ White women missionaries stepped into this framework of power, displacing the mistress’ role with themselves as “mothers to the Black race.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Joe M. Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), ix.

¹⁷ The construct of the cult of true womanhood painted middle-class white women as paragons of piety and purity, having a civilizing influence on men and their children. White missionaries like Towne saw their missional work as an extension of their domestic influence and saw Black people as children who needed their civilizing influence. Thavolia Glymph explores this further in her most recent book. Glymph, *The Women’s Fight: The Civil War’s Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2021), 164-195.

¹⁸ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 20; Ingrid H. Tague, *Women of Quality: Accepting and Contesting Ideals of Femininity in England, 1690-1760*, (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2002), 97, in Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 20.

¹⁹ Thavolia Glymph, *The Women’s Fight: The Civil War’s Battle for Home, Freedom, and Nation*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2020), 164.

Missionary Laura M. Towne exemplifies this assumption of white matriarchal authority over Black women. On St Helena Island, Towne and her missionary counterparts moved first onto Pope's Plantation, then the Oaks, and eventually to Frogmore House, each of which had been deserted by its Confederate owners. By assuming the "Big House," Towne's actions spoke louder than her excited words about "keeping house."²⁰ After claiming the house, Towne then comfortably sought the services of formerly enslaved women, having Clarissa clean the house for her. Towne had Clarissa sleep there so that she "may not be alone," a scene reminiscent of Harriet Jacobs' account of an enslaved woman, Aunt Nancy, whose mistress forced her to sleep on the floor, a requirement that disabled and eventually killed her.²¹ Her diary is filled with interactions with newly freedwomen whom she kept around her as servants. While the visibility of the formerly enslaved in her diaries, her work founding the Penn School, and her almost forty-year tenure on the Islands, evidence her proximity and commitment to abolitionism, they do not guarantee that her ideals of Black freedom aligned with those of the formerly enslaved.²²

Towne assumed the position of ruling mother to formerly enslaved women, comfortably asserting herself as an authority figure in a myriad of ways. Towne recalled Union soldiers who saw her walking through town with Caroline, a Black woman who was escorting them on a visit to other freedwomen's houses, believing her to be a slaveholding woman. Though Caroline was directing them she walked behind Towne and the other white missionary women, provoking Union soldiers to remark: "there go the southern aristocrats with their nigger behind them."²³

²⁰ Ibid, 166.

²¹ Towne, January 27, 1864, Frogmore House, South Carolina, in *The Penn School Papers*, 171. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself*, (Boston: Published for the Author, 1860), 217.

²² Laura M. Towne, born in 1825 in Pittsburg, Massachusetts, came to Port Royal on commission from the Philadelphia Port Royal Relief Committee (PPRRC). A self-proclaimed abolitionist and trained homeopathic nurse, Towne had long attended the church of Dr. William Henry Furness, a prominent abolitionist minister when she accepted the commission of the PPRRC. Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 77-78.

²³ Towne, April 8, 1862, in *The Penn School Papers*, 3

Though this minor incident was a soldiers' misunderstanding, it suggests the roles assumed by Towne and Caroline closely resembled what an observer thought enslavement would look like. Though it cannot be definitively said, Towne's account did not report this as a mistake that she was offended by, but, seemingly, as a funny one by which she was flattered.

White missionary women's presumptions of mothering authority interrupted Black women's efforts to create home through having autonomy over their lives. Sarah and Lucy Chase served as missionaries in Virginia, residing in Craney Island and Norfolk for several years during the war, and operated in a similar way to Towne.²⁴ They, too, moved into a plantation house, surrounded themselves with formerly enslaved women, and sought to operate as authority figures over them. Upon witnessing a Black church gathering, Sarah Chase concluded that their "religious feeling [was] purely emotional, void of principle, and no practical utility." Further, after interacting with the contraband people, she concluded that they were "extremely ignorant, incompetent... uneducated in principle." The solution, Chase believed, was for them to "enter freedom through the path of moral restraint," which she believed herself and other missionaries to be the ushers of. Black women, she deigned, were completely devoid of what womanhood required of them, prompting her determination that she and the other missionaries would ensure "skill, neatness, economy and self-independence [would] be developed," awakening the "dormant in-born faculties," of these undomesticated field hands.²⁵ These perceptions of the enslaved people were steeped in preconceived notions about race and reflected popular

²⁴ Sarah and Lucy Chase were daughters of Anthony Chase, a wealthy businessman in Massachusetts, and were a staunch Quaker family. They were active Quakers spending their time fighting for social reform. Throughout their youth they attended boarding school and, in their adulthood, attended lectures in pursuit of their intellectual development and moral crusades, advocating for the anti-slavery cause and anti-capital punishment around Philadelphia. "The Early Lives of Freedmen's Teachers Lucy and Sarah Chase," American Antiquarian Society Online Resource, accessed via: <https://www.americanantiquarian.org/Freedmen/Intros/chaseearly.html>

²⁵ Sarah Chase, January 15, 1863, Craney Island, Virginia, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 24.

abolitionist ideas of the institution of slavery as one that degraded Black people to some subhuman state that training in “skill, neatness, economy, and self-independence,” could undo.²⁶

Elizabeth Hyde Botume, a missionary at Port Royal throughout the war, held similar ideas about the newly freed.²⁷ According to Botume, until the formerly enslaved people became “capable of themselves thinking and acting judiciously, the service of *competent instructors* will be received” to teach them. The freedpeople required teaching, both the young and old, in “the rudiments of civilization and Christianity... amenability to the laws of both man and God... [and in] relations to each other as social beings.”²⁸ Botume’s description also demonstrates that she saw herself and other missionaries not just as charitable givers but “competent instructors,” for the freedpeople whom she saw as devoid of civilization, religion, morality, or social capability. Rather than approaching the enslaved with a curiosity about their cultural practices and seeking to understand their differences, Botume’s description reveals a sense of hierarchy that shaped how her accounts of interactions with freedpeople should be read.

Each of these women’s words and behaviors makes clear the power that they consciously and unconsciously sought to wield in their relationships with formerly enslaved women. This presumption of power over the newly freedwomen, thus became an obstacle to their building of free homes, as they did not accept Black women’s autonomy. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Union lines brought free soil to the plantations upon which Black people had been held captive. Thus, missionaries’ racial condescension and choice to occupy these sites of white supremacy as the “competent instructors” of freedom, make the interactions between them and the newly

²⁶ Indeed, enslavement degraded its victims, however, there is a way in which many abolitionist missionaries expressed this which implied the formerly enslaved were debased to the point of savagery and subhuman status. This ideology fed into white supremacist actions of many white missionaries who saw themselves as rightful overlords of the newly freed.

²⁷ Elizabeth Hyde Botume was born in Massachusetts in 1823 and became a missionary to Port Royal, commissioned by the New England Freedmen’s Aid Society as a teacher.

²⁸ Elizabeth Hyde Botume, *First Amongst the Contrabands*, (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1893), 17.

freedwomen they employed and encountered part transformation of the plantation household that Thavolia Glymph outlines. Glymph explores the plantation household in Confederate territory and argues that Black women's resistance throughout the Civil War, which had previously been dismissed as "humorous or harmless, attributing to race," throughout the antebellum era, now no longer seemed "innocent or manageable." Black women's acts of resistance during the war, from refusing commands to committing violence, caused the undoing of the power of mistresses.²⁹ Because white missionaries took over plantations as their residences and saw the newly freed with racial condescension, the power struggle that Glymph argues occurred between enslaved women and mistress, was also present between newly freedwomen and white women missionaries.

These relationships between white missionary women and Black women were complex. Formerly enslaved men and women accepted work in the houses of these missionaries and exhibited gratitude for their schoolhouses and material aid. Simultaneously, Black women were savvy to white missionaries' attempts to write their subservience into the definition of their newfound freedom. Thus, in response, Black women drew hard boundaries and parameters around their relationships with and service to white missionary women where they could, assertively claiming their autonomy.

Where white missionary women understood themselves to be the "mothers" of the newly freed, Black women resisted their authority in a myriad of ways. On Craney Island, a missionary woman frequently complained of the women's refusal to do as she asked. Mary Jane, a formerly enslaved woman still living at the house and working as a servant, continually ignored the missionary's requests. Though the white woman told Mary Jane to 'put some warm water in this

²⁹ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 100.

jug, and clean it for molasses,' before tea, she found herself repeating the command again a few hours later. She went to bed and arose the next day to see that Mary Jane still had not completed the task. 'Two days later, I clean it myself.' She found this to be the case with her requests for Mary Jane to tend to the fire and to put on the kettle. Even when Mary Jane was told to boil the kettle so that she 'may boil some eggs,' another command as an invitation, Mary Jane simply refused, saying that the kettle 'has boiled sometime ago, Maam.' This forced the woman to conclude, 'if you want anything done, just do it yourself, seems to be the maxim of the islanders.'³⁰ The missionary misunderstood Mary Jane's refusal for rampant individualism when it is more indicative of her beliefs about her position as a free Black woman. Where the missionary assumed authority over her, Mary Jane asserted her independence and free will to do as she pleased, regardless of what was asked of her.

Mary Jane was not alone in this implicit denunciation of white authority. The newly freed women of Craney Island and Norfolk, Virginia, repeatedly demonstrated their belief that their freedom meant freedom from unwavering subordination to the whims of white people. One evening at a mission house in Norfolk, an unnamed group of men and women serving as cooks and domestic servants to the white missionaries who had taken up residence among them, rejected their employers' authority. The cook had worked hard to prepare dinner for herself and the others as well as for the missionaries, yet upon serving the food, the missionaries complained it "came up cold," and sent it back for her to heat up in the oven. Making a silent protest, the cook did not return the mutton to the missionaries, but threw it on the ground in the kitchen, and continued eating her dinner with the 'waiter and other attendants.'" The missionaries waited with the expectation for the food to return to them just as they had demanded, only to "look after it"

³⁰ Lucy Chase, April 1, 1863, Craney Island, Virginia, in Swint, *Dear Loved Ones at Home*, 63

and find it on the floor.³¹ This silent confrontation is one the cook could not have engaged in during her enslavement, yet she did so boldly with a white missionary woman. She rejected the missionary's assumption of authority over her, refusing to put aside her enjoyment of her own dinner to attend to the needs of the missionaries. Although no words were exchanged after the missionaries sent it back, both the cook's silence, and throwing the mutton on the kitchen floor demonstrate her belief that freedom allowed her to work for white people under her own terms. Whether the cook felt disrespected by the insinuation that her cooking was not good enough for them, or perhaps she was simply hungry and irritated by their assumption that she would leave her meal to serve them ahead of herself, her refusal speaks volumes of the hierarchy she believed her freedom had toppled. To the cook, freedom meant she could prioritize herself over the pleasure of the white people she served; it granted her autonomy.

This proved to be a problem on the Virginian mainland, in Norfolk. There, white missionaries resided in the main house of former enslavers and the formerly enslaved people remained in the slave quarters, next to the kitchen. The missionaries complained that, even though they “run to it, scream to it, send to it, try hard to get something done in it, and try harder to get something brought out of it,” they could not get the formerly enslaved people to do anything for them. Even when called upon by name, the newly freedwomen passed the required tasks on to one another: “... but if we call on Polly, she summons Betty; and ‘Mary Jane do this;’ is sure to wake the echo, ‘Oh Albert, whar’s Albert.’”³² While it seems that the newly freed people happily employed their newfound ability to say no, they also seemed to entertain themselves by mocking the missionaries' sense of authority, calling on one another to do a task they knew no one would do. This playful yet powerful resistance to the domestic authority of

³¹ Ibid.

³² Sarah Chase, September 30, 1863, Craney Island, Virginia, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 81.

northern white women shifted the longstanding power dynamic that the missionaries sought to exploit. They happily took up residence in the “Big House,” appropriating the power of the enslavers for themselves, summoning the newly freedpeople from the slave quarters in which they still resided. Ignoring these calls and passing the requests from one person to the next, allowed the newly freed to reject white northerners as the stewards of their freedom and free identities and claimed it for themselves.

On St. Helena Island, South Carolina, this resistance looked similar, among Rina, Hastings, John, and a young Black boy, domestic servants to missionaries stationed there. In March 1864, the missionary woman wanted to host a dinner party for her counterparts. Rather than serving the dishes as the white guests expected, the missionary remarked upon the food being served in a disorganized way: “the potatoes were forgotten entirely, and the fried oysters appeared with the pudding.”³³ Prior to freedom, Rina and the others would have prepared food to the letter of the demands, going to great pains to ensure food was warm and served in the correct order for fear of punishment. However, Rina understood her position as a free woman to come with no such threats, and thus served the food as she saw fit, likely as they were ready. In Rina and the others’ willingness to serve the food out of order, we see a rejection of the idea that white people inherently held power over Black people, and that the latter should act in accordance with that authority. Instead, a simple disorganized meal demonstrates Rina’s beliefs of who she was as a free woman and what she could now do in response to white women.

Not only did the newly freed refuse the whims of white missionaries, but they also empowered their kin and children to assert this same right. At this same dinner party, Rina’s helping hand, Hastings, became excited about the lavish meal and wanted to contribute

³³ Towne, March 12 1864, Helena Island, South Carolina, in Holland, *Letters and Diary*, 133.

something special. He told Rina he “had a tureen at his home and would like to lend it,” but hesitated as he left to retrieve it. He worried that he “was afraid [the missionary] would want to buy it,” if they saw how beautiful it was. Rina confidently told him, the missionaries “would not wish to buy what he did not wish to sell,” an assurance that sent Hastings joyfully on his way to retrieve the dish.³⁴ Rina not only understood freedom from the compulsions of white people as a freedom that applied to her, but she also sought to recalibrate the power dynamics for those around her, too. Her assurance of Hasting’s right to retain his property if he did not wish to sell it, recast his framework for decision making, away from submission to what white people demanded, to what he wanted. Not only could Hastings own beautiful property that could be the envy of white people, but he also had the choice to refuse to even lend or sell it.

Further, the missionary notes that though the “soup appeared handsomely dished” eventually, it arrived “stone cold.”³⁵ This suggests that the missionaries were made to wait for their meal so that Hastings could retrieve the tureen he wished to show off. Rather than serve the dishes to the party her new employer deemed important enough to invite, Rina chose to honor Hastings and his newfound property ownership by waiting for him. This small act is yet another clear example of the ways Black women quietly but boldly recalibrated the power dynamics between Black and white women, particularly in domestic space. No longer was the demand of a white woman Rina’s priority; Hasting’s pride could be Rina’s primary concern. This demonstrates a relational autonomy that Black women seized for themselves and their loved ones.

Black women also exercised their autonomy by teaching their children about theirs. Unlike in slavery, Black women were able to assert their right to decide where their children

³⁴ Towne, Saturday March 12, 1864, in *ibid*, 133-134.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

would be. Many parents expressed their desire for their children to be educated, going out of their way to ensure their child would have a place in the classrooms of the missionary schools, even striving to pay in some way on some occasions. In South Carolina, one missionary remarked upon a Black church elder praying that “‘the white little sisters who came to give learning to the children,’ might be blessed.”³⁶ Black women took the education of their children seriously, provoking some competition between the teachers. Mrs. Wells, another white missionary on the island of St Helena, South Carolina, held classes for the children of the plantation she had assumed as her home and mission field, as well as those from neighboring houses. However, because she offered no more than to “hear them a little reading-lesson,” when they “wanted to learn to write and cipher,” they chose to go to the school of Laura Towne instead. Some children complained that they “‘bog’ across the creek,” to get to her school, only to be sent “back without a lesson,” so they continued to arrive at Towne’s school hoping despite her attempts to refuse “them admittance more than once.”³⁷ This exodus from Mrs. Wells’ poorly taught and irregularly held classroom angered Wells and led her to confront Towne and her counterparts, accusing them of poaching her students. When Towne explained that she had tried to turn the children away and had no desire to have more students in their already overwhelmed classrooms, Wells became defensive. Wells said “with temper that she did n’t care what they did or where they went,” nor did she “want them and did n’t care what they did.”³⁸

Behind these children’s exodus likely stood their mothers. Believing education to be an important facet of their free futures, Black mothers did not accept substandard missionary aid. Rather than submit to the authority white missionary teachers assumed they held, and teach their

³⁶ Ibid, 135.

³⁷ Towne, March 3, 1863, St Helena Island, SC, in Holland, *Letters and Diary*, 104-105.

³⁸ Ibid.

children to submit too, these mothers' directing their children to the better schools, subverted the assumed power dynamic. The traditional hierarchy placed white women and Black women in conflict with one another, but these mothers, by refusing to patronize poor teachers, made this conflict one amongst the white women themselves. Further, Towne commented that upon their arrival in 1862, the formerly enslaved children often "screamed and ran at the sight of white faces."³⁹ This initial terror at the sight of white people transformed into a willingness to reject some white missionaries in favor of others, by 1864. This shift in Black children's behaviors suggests that their mothers taught them that freedom eroded the omnipotence of white people in their lives, teaching them, instead, how to advocate for themselves and to navigate their relationships with white people on their own terms.

Teaching their children that white people were no longer all-powerful agents in their lives resulted in their freedom to play and to be childlike outside of their homes. Throughout enslavement, Black adults were obliged to teach children the ways and means of surviving enslavement. Robbed of childhood through their involvement in labor and subjection to "arbitrary authority, punishment, and separation," Wilma King argues, enslaved children grew "old before their time." Not only were parents incapable of protecting their children from these experiences, children learned that their parents were "vulnerable to cruelties."⁴⁰ Thus, behind Union lines, Black children had their first experiences of free childhood and uninhibited play. Where Towne believed racial characteristics made them incapable of "sitting still, of giving attention, of ceasing to talk aloud," it is possible to see children's sense of freedom to play and reject white authority instead. Not only did they "lay down" in class and go to sleep, but they

³⁹ Towne, June 11, 1862, St. Helena Island, SC, in Holland, *Letters and Diary*, 67.

⁴⁰ Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in the Nineteenth Century*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), xxi-xxii.e

also fought one another, “walked off to the neighboring field for Blackberries, coming back to their seats with a curtsy when they were ready.”⁴¹ Towne presumed their disobedience came from their lack of understanding, since she felt she could not understand them. The insubordination of these children at school were assertions of their freedom to be children, acting upon their desires to eat, rest, play, in ways that had previously been impossible in the presence of white adults.⁴² Black mothers were encouraging their children to reclaim childhood, which, under enslavement, was characterized by the threat of violence and forced submission.

Additionally, newly freed mothers asserted their right to protect their children from missionaries’ assumed right to discipline them. Where acting out their parental role, particularly trying to protect their children from the discipline of masters and mistresses, had previously been made criminal, Black women sought to reclaim parental rights by rejecting missionary discipline. Rose, the mother of a boy who attended Elizabeth Hyde Botume’s school, wrote a letter of complaint to the missionary after she “punished [the] boy by placing him in the corner with his face to the wall.” Rose was “highly offended,” and wrote a “saucy letter” (according to Botume), stating that she, the mother, “could lick him, for licks is a very good thing for a chile, but she didn’t want his feelings hurted.”⁴³ While Botume recorded that many of the older Black people she showed the letter to “did not approve of Roses’ conduct,” Rose believed that she held the right to discipline her child and the white woman did not, even as his teacher.⁴⁴ Rose did not simply accept the woman’s authority over her son while he was in her charge, she believed she

⁴¹ Towne, September 1862, St Helena Island, in Rupert Sargent Holland, “Introduction”, in Holland, *Letters and Diary*, xv.

⁴² Wilma King highlights that enslaved children were introduced to labor very early, and play mainly took place in the evenings and on Sundays when work was done and enslaved children were among their kin. Parents, therefore, had to teach their children “how to be slaves and children simultaneously,” as a matter of their survival. King, *Stolen Childhood*, 108, 33.

⁴³ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 250.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

held the right to protect her son, including his “feelings.” Rose was likely concerned about her son being humiliated in public, and about the missionary’s use of her authority to do that. Rose’s decision to write a complaint demonstrates her unwillingness to force her child to submit to maltreatment from white people, even those who were there to help.

Much like they did with Black women, white missionary women sought to train Black children in the ways of racialized subservience, demanding service and obedience from them even outside of the classroom. Towne frequently sought the service of Black children, but could not get them to submit, “no matter how [she] remonstrate[d] and order[ed].” Instead of saying no, or subtly ignoring or evading the commands, like the women serving as domestic servants often did, she complained that they “whip and goad... laughing and jeering in my face at my commands.”⁴⁵ Their playful rejection of her authority demonstrates their understanding, which would have been imparted by their mothers, that white people’s power was no longer total.

Black women’s laughter, and that of their children, served as another subtle assertion of their autonomy that resisted white missionaries’ perceived authority. In Norfolk, one missionary woman complained that the Black women serving her would “laugh convulsively” whenever they would say ““Hark!” to each other.” The missionary seemed somewhat embarrassed by the women’s laughter which came from them never having heard people use it the way the missionaries did.⁴⁶ Laughing directly at the white people they worked for was a freedom of expression that they had not enjoyed before, and demonstrates that they did not wish to simply replicate the white women’s way of being and communicating. Their laughter, at those who believed themselves to be the “competent instructors” in the ways of freedom, served as another pushback to the white supremacy white missionaries sought to promulgate. While the missionary

⁴⁵ Towne, May 1, 1862, St. Helena Island, in Holland, *Letters and Diary*, 30.

⁴⁶ Lucy Chase, Portsmouth, Va, June 13, 1863, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 85.

noted that Black women prized manners and engaged one another with respect and appropriate titles, they did not seek to simply replicate white norms of language and communication. In this simple act of laughter, Black women held on to their cultural norms and asserted them as more appropriate than that of the white missionaries, a small act with subversive consequences.

It seems that newly freedpeople laughed at white missionaries often, and the latter understood it as subversive and consciously or unconsciously punished those that laughed at them. In the same instance outlined in the opening vignette, a missionary woman walked through the streets of Craney Island, approaching newly freedpeople, surveilling their actions, and chastising them as vagrants. In response, one woman complained about the harassment asking the missionary to let her alone. Interestingly, the woman said, “I never tease white folks, I don’t go near you,” yet, she had “not had a thing given to [her] since [she] got here.”⁴⁷ From this woman’s perspective, she had not done what seemingly many other freedpeople had, “tease white folks,” but had been treated as those who had. While the missionaries did not record such acts of retribution against those who dared to mock them, this woman’s observation of such may have indeed occurred. This suggests that white missionaries used their control over the resources for the newly freedpeople as a means of commanding their subordination, particularly with those who rejected their authority.

Beyond the “Big House” and the schoolhouse, Black women claimed their autonomy in their efforts to secure aid from the missionaries. Due to the destitution of the newly freedpeople who fled enslavement, mostly with only the clothes on their backs, missionary aid primarily centered on distributing clothing. Funds raised by aid agencies such as the American Missionary Association, and the many antislavery societies from Philadelphia, Boston, and New York,

⁴⁷ Lucy Chase, April 1, 1863, Craney Island, Virginia, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 67.

mainly went to purchasing and sending clothes, fabric, and sewing materials to the South for the contraband. The missionaries on the ground in Union occupied locations then held “key to the storehouse,” wielding the “gift and the power to give” to the freedpeople. One missionary expressed this, at length, in a letter to her family sharing the “woe” that rested upon her and those who “hold the key to the storehouse.” She reckoned with the “gift and power” she held as well as the depth of the need. However, she approached the newly freed people with a degree of suspicion, stating the difficulty of serving them lay in the fact that, “the needy are many and the greedy and the lying are more.”⁴⁸ When shawls were sent from the north, “every woman... declares she has nothing for her shoulders,” and when blankets were distributed some complained of having only “one thin blanket,” though there were others without any.

Though the number of those who needed clothing far outstripped the supplies missionaries could procure from their various benevolent societies, this description reveals that they became the arbiters of the deserving and the undeserving, the needy and the greedy. This power was further fortified by the belief many missionaries held that they “must strive so to regulate our charities as not to educate paupers, and to *demoralize ourselves*.”⁴⁹ Not only did they control the resources, but they also deemed charity as an agent of demoralization that would curtail the building of independence and self-improvement among the newly freed. Both their position and beliefs made them a source of power that Black women had to navigate.

According to the *Freedmen’s Record* (a journal distributed by the New England Freedmen’s Society), Black women and children made up most of those suffering from the shortage of clothing because they could not wear the castoff clothing from soldiers as older men

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 68.

could.⁵⁰ This made Black women and children as particularly vulnerable to the perceptions and whims of the missionaries who distributed aid. For example, one missionary reported that they told the women “we should give most to those who were most tidy. If a woman had one clean, well-mended gown, we were sure she would take care of another.”⁵¹ This missionary sought to incentivize the women by restricting access to clothing to those who conformed to her standards. Though she recorded that the women replied, “you is right missis! You is right,” a likely play to retain favor, Black women did not simply accept missionaries’ ideas of their own supremacy or of what they believed Black women deserved, but, instead, demanded what they wanted and asserted their dignity by accepting charity on their own terms.

Though missionaries were concerned about being too charitable by giving free aid, Black women resented the insinuation that they could not pay and insisted upon offering payment where possible. One afternoon on St Helena Island, a “very handsome, tall, proud-looking woman,” went to a missionary whom she knew distributed clothes hoping to secure some for herself and her friend. She was “too busy to sell,” and so told the woman, “she could have no clothes,” to which the woman responded, “we not dat kind, ma’am; we got our money here.”⁵² The women thought that the missionary was turning them away as those undeserving of charity, and they sought to disprove that by displaying their industry and independence. While their action aligns with ideas of industriousness and self-improvement, these women demanding clothing based on their ability to pay for it reveals their unwillingness to be interacted with as part of a monolithic underclass, and their expectations that their ability to pay should elicit white missionaries willingness to serve them.

⁵⁰ *Freedmen’s Record* 1, no.1 (January 29, 1865), In Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) ,25

⁵¹ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 121.

⁵² Towne, Monday April 28 1862, in Holland, *Letters and Diary*, 24.

Black missionary women also noted this determination to pay for clothing amongst the freedwomen.⁵³ Edmonia Highgate who was so distraught by the destitution she beheld in Norfolk and at “Rope Walk,” where many of those who arrived at Union lines at Norfolk were initially held, wanted to use her own salary to purchase cloth for the freedpeople. Highgate’s desperation to serve them was not a result of their insatiable appetite for charity, but a result of the sheer dearth of supplies. Highgate wrote to the AMA that “many of the destitute have of their own accord offered to pay for articles we expected to freely give.”⁵⁴ This demonstrates the importance of self-sufficiency to the newly freed, which Black missionary women saw as unexpected due to the depths of their destitution, and white missionaries saw as surprising based on their perceptions of Black greed and indolence.

Black women who purchased or were given fabric and dresses sometimes demanded to be given what they wanted and expressed their opinions about what the missionaries offered them. In a chaotic altercation between a missionary woman and a group of Black women at Port Royal, a missionary was overwhelmed by their demands. One woman, whom she described as “a huge creature... known to be... intolerable,” had been given a dress which she refused to take. She demanded a “better gown than the one given her,” and pressed the missionary into submission. The missionary’s acquiescence provoked the crowd of women to close in upon her, pulling out whichever garments they wanted from her boxes.⁵⁵ While the missionary’s counterpart scolded her for giving them “so much liberty,” and their conversation revolved

⁵³ The presence of Black missionary women from the North among the contraband illuminates class hierarchy as part of the dynamic between missionaries and the newly freed. However, while Black missionaries expressed similar notions of racial uplift for the enslaved, the tone of condescension on the basis of race is specific to white missionaries. This is evidenced by the experiences of racial abuse Black missionaries faced at the hands of their white counterparts, which is explored in depth in the final chapter.

⁵⁴ Edmonia Highgate to George Whipple, Portsmouth VA, April 30th; Edmonia Highgate to W.E. Stricby, Portsmouth VA May 19th 1864, AMAA.

⁵⁵ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 112-113.

around whether the freedwomen were “poor creatures,” to be doted over or “ignorant... human beings,” to be disciplined, this instance is a demonstration of Black women’s resistance to accepting charity that they did not like or deem good enough.

In Norfolk, Virginia, another missionary wrote about a similar exchange with a Black woman to whom she had given “a long strip of gingham.” The missionary “suppose[ed] she would make from it an apron with a waist,” but seeing her a few days later noticed that she had sewn it into a “short fancy apron” instead. Confused and clearly frustrated by the woman’s unexpectedly “fancy” choice, the missionary asked her why she had sewn it that way. The woman responded, “Oh aprons with waists are out of fashion now.”⁵⁶ This woman’s choice of apron pattern differed from what the missionary expected her to do with the fabric given, and she comfortably defended her choice, believing herself to be entitled to something “fancy” and more fashionable than the missionary thought she should have. Although she did not wrestle the missionary for a different dress, this woman’s choice similarly served as an assertion of her dignity and unwillingness to conform to missionaries’ ideas of what they deserved to own.

Many of the women at Port Royal, took advantage of their access to needles and thread from missionaries to accept the dresses and fabric they were given and transform them into something they saw as beautiful. Particularly when they received “an old garment,” these women felt “at liberty to cut and alter and patch it *ad libitum*.” Observing this, the missionary concluded that they preferred old dresses because it “gave them excuse for asking for ‘one needle and a leetle bit o’ thread,” perceiving manipulation in their preference.⁵⁷ However, it is just as likely that these garments allowed Black women to express their creativity and alter them to suit their tastes, both of which were expressive freedoms and assertions of dignity.

⁵⁶ Lucy Chase, Craney Island, VA, January 29, 1863, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 32.

⁵⁷ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 236.

Part of Black women's autonomy included receiving aid on their own terms. Missionaries saw themselves as granting aid to the formerly enslaved, while Black women saw what they could receive as outward displays of their new status. This led to them acting upon their expectations and complaining when missionaries fell short. For example, the opening vignette outlined an interaction between a missionary and two women in the barrack which they had made into their home. When the missionary expressed concern about one of the women's coughs, her companion retorted, "she wouldn't have a cough if she had some shoes," which angered the missionary and led to her departure.⁵⁸ These women did not accept the missionaries' word. From their perspective, it did not align with her deeds. The missionary likely had not given her shoes due to a shortage, but this interaction reveals the Black women's willingness to express their expectations of the missionaries. Rather than interacting with them as paragons of benevolence, which is how many missionaries painted newly freedpeople's views of them, these women serve as an example of many who saw missionaries' responsibility to offer aid and had expectations of them.

Clothing, much like their houses, served as a point of pride for Black women. Much like they did not allow missionaries into their unfurnished and untidy houses, some avoided going to public gatherings if they deemed their clothing unpresentable. As Stephanie Camp argues, "it was not commonplace for bond people to have... fancy attire," but even in the confines of enslavement, many women "worked hard to piece together one special outfit" for Sundays and special occasions.⁵⁹ One missionary described an old woman who shared that she "had not been to church for six months because she had to leave her clothes all behind her, and flee for her

⁵⁸ Lucy Chase, April 1, 1863, Craney Island, Virginia, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 67.

⁵⁹ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women's Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004), 78.

life.” She lamented having to leave her clothes behind because she “used to have plenty of clothes,” but now, behind Union lines, on the soil of freedom, she only had “a few old rags.” If this loss and disappointment were not enough, she was further humiliated by those who knew her before. “The folks that used to be jealous of me now jeer at me and I can't stand that nohow.”⁶⁰ This woman’s refusal to enter the church, a meeting place that many missionaries described as a showcase of the fashions of the newly freed, shows that sufficient clothing represented not only a form of self-expression but also an assertion of dignity. This is further evidenced by her kin who now “jeered” at her rather than envying her as they once had. From their perspective, she had carried herself with arrogance, furnished by the favor of her enslavers, and had been humbled by the self-sufficiency freedom required.

Unlike her white missionary counterparts who saw Black women’s efforts to secure fashionable and pretty clothing as evidence of their innate proclivity for frivolity and unearned extravagance, the Black missionary understood this woman’s humiliation. The missionary who spoke to this woman was Edmonia Highgate, a Black missionary from New York. Highgate sought the “benevolence of some home friends,” and was able to “fit her out so comfortably as to see her at class meeting the following Sabbath rejoicing that Jesus was willing to receive her after she had staid away from Him so long.”⁶¹ Though Highgate did not elaborate her thoughts about this woman’s shame, her efforts to secure clothing that the woman was willing to present herself in church, demonstrates her empathy rather than her judgment.

Similarly, a woman on Craney Island, complained about her isolation on the island, after receiving some pretty clothing from the missionaries. She said, “If I stay on Craney Island all my days, I shan’t have a chance to wear out my clothes, and I know I shall keep coming back after I

⁶⁰ Edmonia Highgate to George Whipple, Norfolk, June 1st 1864, AMAA.

⁶¹ Ibid.

die to see after ‘em!’”⁶² Driven by the same pride as the unnamed woman who avoided church because of her clothing, this woman desired the opportunity to be seen as well-dressed. She went on to express that she could not “help being so fond of my clothes, twas born in me.”⁶³ Enslavement had stripped this woman of something she believed was “born in” her, a love of fine clothing, a pleasure of life that she had never been able to enjoy. Thus, for the first time, in the contraband camp on Craney Island, she sought to claim that pleasure and longed to be able to enjoy it somewhere outside of the camp. The same missionary noted that the “bed ticking fabric” made the “favorite weekday garments [for] the women,” yet another expression of pleasure and preference, both of which were newfound freedoms.⁶⁴ These women expressed their preferences and sought to use the missionaries to the advantage of securing their preferences where possible, inverting the power that missionaries sought to assert over them.

Clothing, therefore, functioned as a key expression of freedom and dignity.⁶⁵ Black women seized the new opportunity to secure appropriate attire for rituals they deemed significant, including funerals and weddings. As Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh argues, in enslavement death was so frequent that few of the dead were afforded funerals or much ceremony, but when the enslaved could, they planned with “punctiliousness befitting the occasion,” including seeking out appropriate clothing for the dead.⁶⁶ Their inability to partake in rituals of death did not signal the insignificance of death to the enslaved. Indeed, as Wells-

⁶² Lucy Chase, Craney Island, VA, January 29, 1863, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 33.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ When “dignity” is used throughout this chapter, it refers to Black women’s desire to present themselves, and be perceived as, women with inherent value, worthy of respect and esteem, the antithesis to the degradation they had experienced throughout enslavement. Black women’s value had been defined by their labor and reproductive potential, thus Black women becoming at home in their free bodies and lives (claiming their autonomy), required assertions of dignity in their clothing, homes, and their relationships with others.

⁶⁶ Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh, *The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2021), 157.

Oghoghomeh shows, enslaved people might perform funerals months after burials had taken place.⁶⁷ This brings greater meaning to the efforts of an unnamed woman to secure clothing for a mother who had died. The woman, who appears to have been kin rather than a relative, “walked... ten miles before breakfast,” because she “needed clothes for burial.” Although she would have to walk back, she “took with her such provisions,” for the burial and funeral, that “she could carry on her head.”⁶⁸ Similarly, a woman named Katherine, “came to beg for a bit of Black to wear as mourning for her mother, Aunt Peg.” Access to clothing from missionaries allowed Black women to engage in rituals of life and death with more dignity than ever before. They sought clothing for themselves and their deceased loved ones, asserting their right to partake in grieving traditions and rituals, and using the missionaries to make that possible.

Even Black women’s expressions of preference and enjoyment through clothing served as a subtle but meaningful part of their free lives. As discussed earlier, clothing was sparse in contraband camps, particularly for women and children. Those who did have clothes often wore dresses that were “nothing but patches sewn together.”⁶⁹ Thus, it is unsurprising that when Black women and girls who, having recently attended sewing school, had made beautiful dresses “to wear to Sunday school the next day,” they expressed “admiration” and joy. Their excitement led the missionary onlooker to conclude: “the delight of the possessor was inexpressible.” Further, the missionary noticed that “the delight of one was shared by all.”⁷⁰ Not only did Black women have access to the resources to own beautiful dresses, but they could also make them themselves, and they could express their delight and enjoyment of their own beauty in the presence of white women. Where enslavement had forced Black women to hide any garments and outfits they had

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 241.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 69.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

fashioned for themselves, often only getting to wear them to secret parties and church gatherings, Black women now displayed their fine clothing and their joy in the presence of white women.

In Norfolk, Virginia, a woman working in the ‘Big House’ for the northern missionaries, beheld the “beauty of a gay dress,” that belonged to one of the white women, and exclaimed, “I should be ready to die, if I could get that dress!”⁷¹ Comparatively, on St Helena Island, Rina, a freedwoman, expressed her love for the “flounced dress” she had been given, which had once belonged to a friend of the missionary she lived with. These women’s pronouncements of beauty and their enjoyment of the material pleasure of dresses in conversation with white women demonstrate an affective freedom that enabled Black women to express their full humanity rather than restrain themselves.

Admiring and procuring beautiful dresses for themselves also served as definitive assertions of Black women’s womanhood. As Stephanie Camp highlights, one of the “badges of slavery” was androgyny that was forced upon Black women in both the work they did and the clothes they wore. They worked in the fields, plowing and sowing alongside men, but were further pushed outside of the construct of womanhood through clothing that made them “resemble men.” One former enslaved man recalled that he “couldn’t tell ‘em apart in de field, as dey wore pantalets or breeches.”⁷² Though the masculinization of Black women was never total, their desire to wear dresses and enjoy their physical bodies through the ownership of fine clothing is evident in their interactions with missionary aid.

Each of these contentious grounds between Black and white women missionaries, illuminate Black women’s efforts to claim autonomy and their becoming at home in their own

⁷¹ Lucy Chase, January 20, 1863, Craney Island, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 30.

⁷² Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 79; George Flemming in Rawick, *American Slave*, Series 1. 11:130, in Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 79.

lives as decision-makers and authorities. Black women rose to these conflicts and challenged racial hierarchies that sought to perpetuate their subservience through their consistent assertions and expressions of their autonomy. These moments, though interpersonal and discrete, fundamentally shaped Black freedom for themselves and their kin.

* * *

Throughout enslavement, Black women's bodies were violated and degraded. Thus, a major part of building free homes included becoming at home in their own free bodies. Achieving a sense of home in bodies that had been appropriated for the perpetuation of the slave regime required Black women to reclaim and repurpose their bodies for freedom. This included their expressions of complex emotions and ethics, the ways they conducted familial and romantic relationships and sharing the truth about the traumas of their enslavement.

Black women also began to openly express their emotions regarding family, kin, and lovers. They used missionaries to maintain these family and kinship connections and to fuel their romantic lives. Where white men and women had long been conduits of the separation of Black families, Black women turned them into agents of family cohesion by asking them to write letters. Most missionary women commented about their role as letter writers for the freedpeople, as an activity that occupied "much of [their] spare time."⁷³ Black women sought out missionaries to write on their behalf (and also to read the responses to them), dictating them and sending them "to every nook and corner of the Confederacy, hunting for lost members of scattered families," hoping to "send greetings to friends left behind," and to those separated from them by military

⁷³ Botume, *First Days with the Conrband*, 143.

service or camp placement.⁷⁴ The content of their letters and moments between them and their writers reveal much about their efforts to maintain relationships with kin and also about their relational boundaries with white women.

The newly freedwomen used white women to maintain their romantic connections to their “beau,” husband, or potential interest. In South Carolina, the missionary who wrote countless letters for the freed women noted the eagerness with which the women sought to write to their husbands and lovers. They arrived in groups, each “with a sheet of paper carefully folded in her apron or handkerchief, to beg [her] to write their letters, even though she could “with difficulty understand what they said.”⁷⁵ Judy, a newly freedwoman, explained that her owners had “kept [her] husband away from [her] three years... and tried to make [her] marry another man,” which she refused to do. Each time her husband, Sam, was caught attempting to visit he would be whipped and sent back to his plantation, where his owner would whip him, until he was sold away and they could no longer keep in contact. Sam and Judy were eventually reunited but their story serves as a typical example of what romantic relationships endured during enslavement.⁷⁶ Thus, Black women seized the opportunities presented by missionary presence to build and sustain their free romantic lives, particularly after Black men’s enlistment in the United States Colored Troops in 1863 led to many women being separated from their “Beau.”

It is clear that when it came to love letters, where possible, Black women sought out missionaries they believed could relate to them as women in love and expected these white

⁷⁴ Ibid, 143.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 144.

⁷⁶ Historian Tera Hunter argues that one third of first marriages between enslaved people “were disrupted by the interstate slave trade, and many more were broken apart by temporary loans and long-term hiring out.” This reality, alongside the denial of legal marriage, led to the severing of families, but did not mean that enslaved people did not desire romantic connections. Hunter highlights that enslaved people “believed that their marriages were as ‘true’ as they could be,” while taking seriously the “unique burdens,” they faced. Tera Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 26,29.

women to write for them from a sense of shared humanity. Hence, when an older missionary in the South Carolina Sea Islands offered to write love letters for a group of young women, thinking she had written other letters for them, the women declined her offer. They asked specifically for Miss Fannie. Whether it was that Miss Fannie was a younger woman, or less judgmental of the women's emotional expression and relationships, a group of women believed that she would "know best what to say," to their lovers. As Miss Fannie wrote for them, the other missionary watched the women become "merry over" the talk of romance and letter-writing.⁷⁷ Georgie stepped forward first to dictate her letter. When asked what she wanted to be written, Georgie exclaimed, "What would you say? You mus' be write letters like 'a this," expecting the missionary woman to be able to relate to her. When Fannie wrote for Jane, another woman in the group, she, too, depended upon her perceived commonality with Fannie, saying, "I want you to write jes' as if you is talking to your own luvyer (lover), and you 'specs him to marry you'na w'en he gits home."⁷⁸ These women's expressions of commonality with Fannie, a young white woman, was a meaningful assertion of their self-perception as free women; not only did they make a white woman a conduit of their romantic lives, they made her consider them no different to her.

Black women also asserted their dignity by presenting themselves as interested in, but not desperate for, the men they wrote to. When Georgie was asked whether William, the recipient, was her husband, all the women giggled saying "Oh he is... You know he is," but Georgie expressed her reluctance to call him that.⁷⁹ "Well I haven't got the tiffity (certificate) yet, an' so I

⁷⁷ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 146.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ It is likely that the missionary's terms for romantic partnerships were limited to marriage and courtship, while Georgie likely had many more categories into which her relationship with William could fall. As Tera Hunter argues, enslaved people faced a lot of obstacles to sustained romantic relationships and chose to engage romance in various ways. Some (mainly young people) chose short term connections which they named "sweethearts," while others chose "taking-up," which referred to longer term connections that sometimes resembled marriage and other

sha'n't call him that." Georgie was not concerned about whether the missionary deemed her love letter as appropriate for the status of her relationship, she was concerned that he not "t'ink I car much ef he never come back," but wanted him "to know I 'member him sometimes." She directed Miss Fannie, "You mus' talk stiff, but kind'a easy too."⁸⁰ Georgie hoped that her free life would include being joined in marriage to William, but also wanted to express her own dignity by not presenting herself as overly attached to him.

Similarly, another woman wrote entirely to complain to her lover. She believed herself to be "true forebber," despite the fact he had failed to "treat [her] as a gentleman" would, demanding money from her when she "nebber been paid for [her] work yet."⁸¹ Although she admitted to sending him money when he asked, clearly, she had had enough and sought to draw a firm line. While she was happy to an extent to help her lover, she, too, asserted her dignity and protection of her own financial wellbeing.

Another instance of asserting esteem and dignity can be seen in Susannah, a freedwoman, who used her letter-writing opportunity to convey her unavailability to a man who had been pursuing her. She asked her friends to leave so she could have privacy, then instructed Fannie to "write strange to this gentleman," addressing him as "Sir" because she "don't call him [her] friend." She wanted him to understand that he "ain't [have] no cause for writing," and she did not understand who he thought she was. "Does he t'ink I is an apple way down on de groun' under his foot. That he can stoop down... an' pick up wid his hans'," she said as she gestured to the ground. "Tell him I isn't dat." Susannah kept the apple metaphor and proclaimed, "I is an

times were temporary. Thus, the undertone in these letter writing conversations between formerly enslaved women and white missionary women was a communication gap. Where these white women looked for signs of marriage, the only romantic bond they deemed legitimate, Black women saw many more possible frameworks for legitimate relationships. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 31.

⁸⁰ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 146.

⁸¹ *ibid*, 152.

apple high up on de top branch ob de tree,” which would not “drop in his mouth,” nor be reached even “ef he jump an’ jump, till he jump his head off.”⁸² Whomever this man was, Susannah’s definitive rejection of his advances was a clear assertion of her dignity and self-worth, neither of which freedom granted her, but only allowed her to express through a white woman. Susannah married a “bright young fellow” whom she had attended the mission school with several months after this letter was sent. She could not be obliged to marry or entertain the advances of a man she had no interest in, like a master or mistress could have enforced in her enslavement, Susannah asserted her right to choose her romantic partner and suffered no violence in doing so.

On Craney Island, another Black woman asserted her dignity by communicating her expectations of her husband in freedom. She requested the missionary to write to her “Dear husband,” who was not with her in the contraband camp, for reasons that remained undisclosed, to tell him “that if he does not come to join her, she shall be obliged to get another ‘Bough [Beau].”⁸³ This woman’s refusal to tolerate her husband’s abandonment demonstrates her understanding of their newfound mobility as a reality that no longer made separation an irrevocable situation. Wherever she was she believed that he could get to her and was choosing not to and threatened him with an abandonment of her own.

Throughout the war, the nation debated the legalization of marriages between enslaved people. As Tera Hunter argues, this debate deemed marriage to be the “undoing of slavery and a way to preserve the nation-state,” while also making Black men “heads of households, making them miniature sovereigns on par with whites.”⁸⁴ While this debate involved the ideas of many, formerly enslaved women’s ideas were not documented or considered, though their presence was

⁸² *ibid*, 148.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 37.

⁸⁴ Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 167.

required for this construct to be realized. Reading these letters dictated by Black women, written by missionary women, reveals that Black women very much had ideas about their romantic lives and what their marital relationships should look like. Their willingness to complain to their potential husbands, demand respect, and assert themselves as women with dignity and esteem, worthy of good men whom they would choose for themselves, elucidates their ideas about legal marriage. Black women had no interest in their status transferring from “slave” to “subject” of unworthy and unkind men; they desired love, affection, and support.

Black women’s expressions of familial and romantic love were met with white women missionaries’ surprise. One missionary reported that within their letters, Black women expressed “such exhortations to constancy, protestations of eternal devotion... full of dignity and tenderness,” as though she expected to find much less emotional connection and expression from Black women.⁸⁵ However, these expressions from Black women are not included and explored here from a perspective of surprise. Rather, I argue their letters as assertions of dignity. This is not to suggest that freedom gave them a self-conscious dignity that did not exist during enslavement in their relationships. Black women were, in both slavery and freedom, three-dimensional human beings with dynamic and complex emotional lives. What is notable about their letters, and the dignity asserted within, is that they were, for the first time, able to use white women as conduits of their love by sharing openly about their familial and romantic connections. Asserting their dignity to Black men, through white missionaries allowed Black women to claim the respect they believed themselves to be due while also, inadvertently, requiring it from the white women, too.

⁸⁵ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 152

Black women delighted in their newfound ability to communicate with the loved ones they missed. Their effusive thanks to the Sea Islands missionary as she read the letters she had written back to the group of women were loud as “they all shouted with delight,” and “clapp[ed] their hands with great glee.”⁸⁶ One woman exclaimed, “I tell you writing-larning’s a powerful thing.”⁸⁷ In these moments, Black women claimed writing for more than the self-improvement that missionaries, both white and Black, believed would lead them into economic independence. Writing, to these women, was a “powerful thing,” because it could express their thoughts and feelings with their loved ones who were far away in a way that had previously been impossible.

Many of the letters dictated by Black women sought to communicate with loved ones about their health and wellbeing. Prior to the Civil War, retaining contact with loved ones and kin who had been sold away was markedly difficult. Many women shared with white missionaries about the harrowing reality of not knowing whether their family member was alive or dead, or had not heard from their child, sibling, or husband for years. One woman residing in a contraband camp in Poplar Springs, Virginia, shared this lament with a white missionary woman. She had “twelve chillum” yet she was “sitting by her lone,” because “they’s all sold away from me down to New Orleans.” Welling up, the woman said, “I don’t know what has become of one of ‘em. It hurts me mightily to think of them.”⁸⁸ It was not until they claimed Union occupied locations as free soil that many reunited with those they had lost years before. The hope of reunion led to missionaries being witness to “the anxiety of mothers peering into every strange face, to see if they can discern some trace of the long-lost child.” Of course, reunion was not guaranteed and contraband camps were filled with “parents... looking for lost children and...

⁸⁶ Ibid, 47

⁸⁷ ibid, 146

⁸⁸ C. E. McKay, *Stories of Hospital and Camp*, (Philadelphia: Remsen and Haffelfinger, 1876), 169/

waifs of children without a friend.”⁸⁹ In these situations, many who had reached the Union had been separated from others during their journey, and others hoped their kin would find them behind Union lines, “begging to have letters written to the place where” their children “were last heard from.”⁹⁰ Thus, when they knew the locations of family members and friends they were separated from, they sought to keep their kin updated about their location and wellbeing, actively retaining their knowledge of one another’s bodily safety.

At Port Royal, one woman asked a missionary to write to her husband “whom she called ‘My old man,’” although she was not certain of his exact location, she knew he was part of “Colonel Markley’s regiment, Co. E Street.” While she asked for him to send her some money, he asked the missionary “to say that she was well and all the folks were well, and she sent how-d’ye and so did they.” She then went on to list family members by name, offering assurances of their wellness through simply sharing their “how-d’ye.” “Your father sends how-d’ye,’ and ‘your mother sends how-d’ye,” and so on, “giving each a name.”⁹¹ While the missionary saw this as a long-winded and thus inconvenient letter to have to write, it is clear that the woman understood the anxieties of separation and that “how-d’ye” conveyed simply that everyone her husband loved and cared about was alive and that his family and friends had not been further separated or lost.

In Norfolk, Virginia, a young girl made the same request for a letter to be written to her friend, though hers conveyed the fragility of her free status. The missionary readied herself to write a long letter, but the girl simply asked that she write that: “she was very well and hoped her friend was also, wanted her to come and see her.” She closed the letter confirming that she “had

⁸⁹ Towne, St Helena, S.C., January 21 1865, in Holland, *Letters and Diary*, 149.

⁹⁰ McKay, *Stories of Hospital and Camp*, 178.

⁹¹ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 145.

nothing more to say at this time present' but 'I have just heard that Henrietta is sold!'⁹² The ability to simply convey wellness and her desire to see her friend is made even more poignant by her sharing that Henrietta, likely a mutual friend, family member, or kin from the same plantation had recently been sold. Black women understood the fragility of their burgeoning free lives, knowing of others sold or removed to the interior by masters, being dragged out of Union lines during Confederate raids or by the pursuit of their masters, and thus took every opportunity to confirm and reconfirm their safety.

Letter writing, therefore, served not only as communication but a way for Black women to process their shifting status as freedpeople, with their loved ones who were far away. For instance, one young mother wrote to the father of her child informing him that their child had been born and lived. She exclaimed, “he been born free, thank God!” She also expressed to the missionary her excitement that “when the boys come home from the wars” there would “be lots of weddings please God!”⁹³ The children born to women in the contraband camps belonged to the freedom generation, the first to be born free for enslaved people who were still becoming free themselves. This woman’s effusive joy towards her husband could only be conveyed to him through a letter since he was away fighting with the Union, thus she took the opportunity rather than remained in silence.

Additionally, sickness was rife in contraband camps with many experiencing smallpox outbreaks as well as a myriad of other sicknesses induced by destitution. This meant that death was commonplace within the camps and Black women often used letters to communicate with others about the death of loved ones. On Craney Island, a woman asked a missionary “to write to her sister that another sister had died in her tent yesterday, ‘half an hour of the sun.’” Though

⁹² Lucy Chase, January 29, 1863, Craney Island, SC, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 38.

⁹³ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 152

harrowing news to share, it was a means of expanding their emotional lives so that grief was not compounded by an inability to share it. Further, it was pragmatic. Only a day later, the missionary found that they had received a letter from the sister to whom she had just penned a letter, addressed to the deceased sister, in which she offered to “furnish her sister with money if she needed it and begged her to go to Fort Hamilton.”⁹⁴ Similarly, another woman named Fanny asked the missionary to write to a friend saying: “your mother is ceasted (deceased), and your sister Sally. I am right well, I thank you.”⁹⁵ Even in these seemingly curt communications of death to one another, the compassion and considerateness are clear. Black families were supporting one another financially, even if they were apart, and hoped to forge free lives together. Thus, the ability to communicate death to one another was pragmatically consequential in terms of their future and access to resources.

In one distressing situation, a “poor, broken hearted old woman,” had lost her only daughter, Amoretta. Before Amoretta’s death, her husband, a soldier in Colonel Higginson’s regiment, had become “terribly home-sick and he deserted and came back,” until he was caught and sent to Fort Pulaski in Savannah. Losing her husband, a second time, devastated Amoretta and she was allegedly “never seen to smile after he was taken away,” even after giving birth to their baby. Hearing that Robert, her husband, had been discharged only three weeks after their baby was born, proved to be “too much for his poor wife,” and she died the next morning. She and the baby were found by her mother the next day, though the baby was “sleeping in her arms.”⁹⁶ The baby’s grandmother found herself mourning the death of her daughter while being responsible for the child and deemed informing Robert as a matter of urgency. She asked the

⁹⁴ Lucy Chase, January 29, 1863, Craney Island, SC, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 37.

⁹⁵ Lucy Chase, April 1, 1863, Craney Island, in Swint, *Dear Ones at Home*, 61.

⁹⁶ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 152-153.

missionary to write to Robert to tell him “Amoretta did not die but the good Lord jes’ took her straight up to hebben to hisself.”⁹⁷ This letter did not just inform him of his wife’s death, it allowed him to know and prepare for his free life without her and as a single father, neither of which he likely imagined for himself.

Black women also wrote letters to ensure the spiritual practices and support they needed surrounding death could take place, claiming the dignity of their bodies even in death. Peggy, a formerly enslaved woman, asked a missionary to write on her behalf and waited all day when the missionary told her she would not be able to until after school. “Oh! I can wait all day for you ma’am,” and she did. When the missionary finally returned she explained her situation before dictating the letter. Peggy and her husband had been “driven out of Savannah by a cruel master,” while their baby was only a few days old. Following Sherman’s army, they arrived in Beaufort where Union officials sent them to “one of the most remote houses in our district, where they both grew sick and the baby died.” Shortly after that, her husband died.⁹⁸ The letter Peggy dictated was to Father Cuffy Anderson, the elder of her church, asking that he “have a praise in the church for me,” and for “all the friends to pray” for her now that she was a “lone woman.” She shared his final words of faith telling her “don’t fret” because he would “prepare a place” for her in heaven.⁹⁹ Although it does not seem that Peggy was requesting funeral rites, she used letter writing as a means of communicating her loss and requesting what she needed and wanted from her religious community. Much like letters conveying death to family members whom the deceased had been dependent upon, informing one’s religious community allowed for them to receive the spiritual support she evidently deemed necessary.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 149.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Missionaries valued letter writing for the newly freed women as the “best means of becoming acquainted with their characters and needs and of helping them.”¹⁰⁰ Taking opportunities to hear about their lives and stories of their prior lives, while also teaching them how to tend to a fire and do other housekeeping tasks, the missionaries saw these moments as valuable for their understanding of the freedpeople.¹⁰¹ Each time Black women asked for a letter to be penned on their behalf, they were obliged to share their private lives. In these moments, Black women shared their lives, ideas about themselves and freedom, as well as their experiences, with white missionary women. Sharing all these aspects of life required Black women’s willingness and vulnerability. Thus, for the historian, these letter-writing moments reveal much about Black women’s relationships with white missionary women, as well as their newfound ability to express the grief and trauma of enslavement to white women.

While most published diaries and letters from white missionaries to the South sought to emphasize how well-loved they were by the newly freed people, the reality was that Black women, men, and children did not immediately trust or like the white missionaries.¹⁰² One missionary highlighted this reality in the Sea Islands, writing: “it was a long time before these refugees could get rid of their suspicions of white people. Perhaps they never did.” She believed their suspicion to be because, “since the beginning of the war,” they had “time and time again been deceived by Northerners and Southerners.”¹⁰³ Indeed, throughout the war, white people

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 151.

¹⁰¹ Elizabeth Hyde Botume described instructing a group of women on how to build a fire in the fireplace while she wrote for them, after realizing they did not know how to. Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 144

¹⁰² While these sources have, evidently, proven useful to the exploration of Black people’s lives and ideas, demonstrating a relationship between them and missionaries, it is also important to understand the genre. Letters and diaries were published in the later nineteenth century amid Reconstruction and after its demise. These books were published likely to raise funds for aid agencies continued work in the South, as well as to counter the anti-Reconstruction sentiment among both Northerners and Southerners. Thus, presenting themselves as well loved was important to conveying the efficacy and necessity of the mission.

¹⁰³ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 55.

from both the North and South had lied to the enslaved about countless things, including fake colonization programs, promises of work up North, and the cannibalism of the Yankees.

However, neither these lies nor the violence they experienced behind Union lines from their alleged deliverers, were the sole cause of Black people's suspicion. Botume's evaluation failed to consider that Black women, men, and children understood the infrastructure and manifestations of white supremacy, and their suspicion ran much deeper than their wartime experiences. For generations they and their ancestors had been at the disposal of a system that held both the enslaved and free in a state of restriction, thus their unwillingness to trust white missionaries was not simply reactionary but informed.

This sentiment was perhaps even more palpable at Port Royal where the heart of missional efforts was primarily to transform the formerly enslaved into evidence of the efficacy and viability of wage labor among a Black labor force. The newly freed knew they were being surveilled and judged by the white missionaries who arrived on the islands. Edward S. Philbrick, a Gideonite, noticed this and the perceptivity of the islanders, writing to his wife, a potential missionary teacher: "If you feel any hesitation about coming in contact with them you should n't come, for they are sharp enough to detect any apathy or lurking repugnance, which would render any amount of theoretical sympathy worthless."¹⁰⁴

On the Sea Islands, Black women and men were suspicious of the Gideonite missionaries, perhaps because they perceived attempts at a power grab alongside their racialized judgments. Gideonite missionaries arrived after slave masters had fled the islands following Union occupation. They approached the Sea Islands because they saw a "power vacuum in this prosperous area," and sought to establish Black economic independence through wage labor

¹⁰⁴ S. Philbrick to Mrs. Philbrick, March 17 1862, Beaufort Island, S.C, in Elizabeth Pearson (ed), *Letters from Port Royal: Written at the Time of the Civil War*, (Boston: Clark and Company, 1906), 11.

while buying thousands of acres of land.¹⁰⁵ Between their ideas of freedom (Black subordination through wage labor) and the white supremacy ideologies of many missionaries, it is unsurprising that the Islanders exhibited their suspicions much more readily than any degree of trust.

Thus, the stories of Black women's unwillingness to share their ideas and experiences with white missionaries should not be looked at as the exception, but, more likely, the rule. Botume recorded her experience with Rhina, "an old woman who lived in the yard," who was sick. Going to visit Rhina, at the request of her husband Joseph, Botume quickly decided that "she was more wicked than weak." Rhina was "sitting comfortably by an open fire wrapped in a blanket," when Botume arrived and refused to engage her questions, looking at her "cunningly, but [making] no answer."¹⁰⁶ While Rhina was known for being disagreeable amongst her family, to the extent that her husband eventually decided to leave her, her unwillingness to speak to the white missionary suggests her suspicion about the woman's intentions and motives behind her visit.

Similarly, on St Helena Island, Rina refused to allow Clarissa, a Black child who was seemingly kin, to "talk freely" with Laura M. Towne. Although Rina, opened up herself to Towne (which will be discussed later), Rina encouraged Clarissa's connection with Ellen Murray, Towne's companion, and fellow missionary, but not with Laura. According to Towne, Clarissa was "as merry as a cricket and so good and thoughtful," and received "a good long lesson" from Ellen every day. During these lessons, Towne observed that Clarissa and Murray would "have great sport talking about various things." Towne noticed that Clarissa held her in

¹⁰⁵ Akiko Ochiai argues that the newly freedpeople desired "independent status as yeomen farmers," while the Gideonites wanted to impose wage labor upon them as they believed it to be a superior economic infrastructure. Ochiai argues that this clash between the freedpeople and the Gideonites meant the Port Royal experiment was fraught from its very inception. Akiko Ochiai, "The Port Royal Experiment Revisited: Northern Visions of Reconstruction and the Land Question," *The New England Quarterly*, Vol 74, No.1., (March 2001), 94, 96.

¹⁰⁶ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 150.

“great awe,” but “talks freely with Ellen,” which “Rina will not let her do... with me.”¹⁰⁷ Rina’s reasons for keeping Clarissa from speaking so “freely” with Towne, while instructing her in being respectful, are unknown. Nonetheless, Rina, at least, preferred Murray over Towne, or perhaps she disliked how Towne interacted with children. Whatever her motivations, it is clear that Rina believed interacting with white women with a degree of deference remained necessary, but freedom allowed her to express preferences. Rina’s preference could influence which white women she, and Clarissa, would and would not have a closer relationship with. Enslavement had required Black women to feign amiability with the white people they encountered as a matter of safety, but Rina and Rhina’s actions towards missionaries demonstrate their belief that they no longer had to do that.

Black women made intentional choices about which white missionaries they would speak about their lives with and which they would not. They rejected Botume as a letter writer, preferring to “wait for Miss Fannie.”¹⁰⁸ While this may appear insignificant, it demonstrates Black women’s desire to accept missionary aid on their own terms. The women were content to have Miss Fannie write for them, saying “you knows w’at to say.”¹⁰⁹ For unknown reasons, this group of women looked to Miss Fannie, not Botume, as an eloquent romantic. Black women willingly voiced their evaluations of missionaries, respectfully. They actively directed their relationships with white women missionaries, rejecting relationships and receipt of aid from a position of servile obligation. It is clear that the character assessments occurring between missionaries and the formerly enslaved women were not unidirectional; Black women continued

¹⁰⁷Towne, February 19 1864, St Helena Island, in *The Penn Papers*, 180.

¹⁰⁸ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 146.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

to make their own assessments about the missionary women, their trustworthiness, and what they were useful for.

When trust was established, between themselves and a missionary of their choosing, Black women began to share themselves in a way that allowed them to be fully human and to add to the record of the truth of enslavement. One missionary noted that at the sewing-room, at Port Royal, where women made clothing for themselves and one another, the women were initially suspicious of her and were reluctant to share the pride they took in their work. However, once “the women found me unsuspecting,” likely through time shared with one another and their own efforts to assert themselves as equals, “they exhibited their handicraft with no small degree of pride.”¹¹⁰ Once again, Black women demonstrated their intentional selection of the audience of their expressions of joy and industry. What criteria these women held for evaluating the trustworthiness of white women is unknown, but it is reasonable to assume that some indication of their being viewed with dignity and respect was part of it.

After asking Botume to write a letter to her church elder regarding the death of her husband and child, Peggy willingly answered the missionary’s questions about her enslaved life. As shown before, Peggy shared that she had come from Savannah, after being driven out by her master. According to the missionary, Peggy had the reputation of being “the happiest woman on Port Royal Island,” yet Peggy did not withhold the truth of her traumatic past. When the missionary asked if her owner had been “a good master,” Peggy cried, “Oh! He was very bad. I cannot tell all the cruel things he did to us.” She went on to say that “there is no ugly thing you ever heard of but what he would do... yet I live and I am free, and I thank God.”¹¹¹ Peggy, her husband, and child had gotten sick from “so great exposure, change of climate,” and other

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 53.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 149-150.

unknown things. Though she survived, Peggy never fully recovered, crawling from place to place, and needing to take rests by lying on her back under a tree between leaving the missionary's home and reaching her own. While she was known for her perceived happiness, Peggy had endured great pain and loss recently and throughout her enslaved life, and she made these traumas known while simultaneously claiming her freedom. To Peggy, claiming her free life included speaking truthfully about all that her enslavement had been.

In Poplar Springs, Virginia, women shared with a white missionary their complex emotions surrounding motherhood as enslaved women. One shared the relief that the death of their children gave them, since after death "you know where [the child] is; but when he is sold away you never know what may happen to him." Another woman explained that she had been raped by her master who then became the "father of two of [her] girls," both of whom died. Upon their death he whipped her for declaring that she was "glad of it... for [she] had seen them suffer from sickness, and I knew that if they had lived, master would sell them away from me, as he had the others, but when they were dead he could not mistreat them, as he had mistreated me."¹¹² While the missionary recounted this story as evidence of their "most twistedest up" domestic relations, these expressed sentiments were in accordance with longstanding grief expressions by enslaved women who bore children.¹¹³ Choosing to express this complex web of ethics and emotions with a white woman opened them up to her judgment, and yet their stories elucidate the terror enslavement wreaked on their lives to lead them to such emotional responses

¹¹² McKay, *Stories of Hospital and Camp*, 177-178.

¹¹³ Alexis Wells-Ogohoghomeh argues that the presence of death was a constant reality for enslaved women, that where white spectators saw apathy, "despondency and depression" were visible to the more astute observer. Secondly, Black women's reproductive ability made their sexual subjugation profitable to their masters, and thus considering their children, and themselves, better off if the child died, was a complex but common feeling. As Wells-Ogohoghomeh argues, Black women wrestled with the consequences of bringing children into the world, some going as far as to reclaim their reproductive prerogative through filicide and infanticide. Wells-Ogohoghomeh, *Souls of Womenfolk*, 146,77.

upon their children's death. By sharing stories like these Black women rejected white supremacist ideas that sought to criminalize and morally judge their constrained ethical choices.

Not only did Black women use their stories to shake off perceptions of their barbarity and "twistedest" domestic relations, but they also challenged missionaries' notions of their hypersexuality. By willingly sharing the reality of rape with the missionary women, Black women rejected the notion that they were hypersexual pursuers of white men. They rejected these ideas further by showing their bodies as monuments to the brutality of the slave system. Lorena, a formerly enslaved woman who remained at the Oaks plantation of her enslavement, on St. Helena Island, allowed her body to tell her stories. Seemingly without the request of the missionary or any instigating question, Lorena chose to show her "back, arms, and breasts," to the missionary woman. In doing so Lorena revealed "many places" where "there were ridges as high and as long as my little finger and everywhere marks of the whip." She then explained that "her children had been killed in her by whipping," after she failed to "do the full task of a field hand." The missionary doubted the story, arguing that it was likely her being "apt to resist" and "rather smart in speaking her mind." Lorena used her body which had long been associated with vice, to reveal the vices of her enslavers and the unimaginable cruelty white supremacist ideas had visited on her body and life. In doing this Lorena forced the white woman to behold her body as one of violent subjugation rather than one of promiscuity and threat.

The missionary conceded that Lorena had "suffered terribly," and that her story gave meaning to her being "more indifferent about her clothes and house than anyone here."¹¹⁴ Lorena's grief over losing her children, as well as her own suffering, led her to a very different place than the disabled Peggy. Where the missionary had seen indifference about her appearance

¹¹⁴ Towne, April 24th 1862, St Helena Island, in Holland, *Letters and Diary*, 33.

and the presentation of her home, Lorena was really exhibiting “despondency and depression.” No matter how their grief was perceived or misperceived, both Peggy and Lorena, are emblematic of the trauma Black women endured as they sought to build free homes and lives.

Unsurprisingly, these traumas followed Black women into freedom. In May 1862, on St. Helena Island, a missionary reported the panic of the Black islanders who waited in dread for the pending Confederate attack of Hilton Head. Many of the women hid, while others were “watching and trembling.” Bess and Phyllis, both elderly women who had lived their entire lives in slavery, told the missionary they had not slept because they “shook all night with fear” and were “so fraid.” The missionary did not understand their fear and sought to assure the women that the Confederates would never kill women, but the women were “sure they would shoot them or lick them to death.”¹¹⁵ While the white Northern women considered the war as between the Union and Confederate soldiers, these women knew that many Confederates would come to reclaim or kill their lost property. Black women’s experiences of enslavement informed how they perceived their free lives behind Union lines: fragile and finite.

Contradicting white women’s sense of safety, telling their stories of enslavement, the content of their stories all highlight the hopes for building free lives and the tension that remained between those free lives and their enslavement. Not only did they seek to build homes free from the shackles of enslavement, they also did so while carrying with them the traumas of generations. Perhaps they told their stories seeking catharsis by making the truth known. Perhaps this, too, was a significant part of becoming at home in their own bodies that housed the traumas of generations. Black women’s willingness to recount their abuses to questionably trustworthy missionaries placed their experiences and ideas on the historical record, a powerful and public

¹¹⁵ Towne, May 12, 1862, St. Helena Island, SC, in Holland, *Letters and Diary*, 43

denunciation of the lies their masters had told. For the first time, besides those who escaped and joined abolitionist circles, formerly enslaved women were able to contradict white images of them as Jezebels and aggressors, painting themselves, instead, as resilient and innovative. Thus, the very act of telling their stories, whether for letters to be written or to simply be heard, Black women freed themselves from the lies the slave regime and white supremacy had told about them. The act of testifying itself demonstrated that the truth of enslavement being told was a key part of what they hoped freedom would include.

Black women's commitment to building free homes, rejection of white omnipotence, and truth-telling about their suffering, behind Union lines, transformed the Union occupation into spaces of freedom. Each of these efforts required consistent confrontations with racial hierarchies among the missionaries, who had come to help them. Thus, their freedom building did not only seek the demise of slavery but challenged the racial condescension that sought to possess the reins of the freedom they fought to build for themselves. Although racial hierarchy would ultimately continue to be the status quo, Black women were active agents whose consistent rejections and evaluations of white missionaries, allowed them to carve out small but significant spaces of freedom that included asserting their dignity, expressing themselves openly, and telling their stories.

CONCLUSION

“Us is Mending:” Black Women Facing the Future of Freedom Building

The Federal Steamboat *St Helena* left Beaufort Island, South Carolina, for Savannah the morning after Emancipation Jubilee, in the winter of 1866. Hattie clambered down into the lower deck. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she saw the bustling of her kin trying to make space so they could all fit. There were two hundred and seventy-five of them, so Hattie knew she would have to find a corner to crouch in. As she did, she remembered the day two years prior, when General Sherman had reached their home in Savannah, Georgia. She remembered how her master fled, while she and the others rejoiced, following Sherman’s army to Union lines. Two years and countless trials later, they were all together, still; they were free, and they were going home. Her heart swelled as she considered the miracle.

The same determination that brought them to Union lines served their escape that day. The Freedmen’s Bureau had kept them on the Sea Islands for almost a year since the war’s end because they and the missionaries were “anxious about their future.” Despite the people’s pleas to return to their homes, the Bureau planned to “keep them under care until the affairs of the country became more settled.” But Hattie and her friends wanted to build freedom for themselves, their own way, in the places they called home. “We’ve been everywhere but home, the place we were all born,” Hattie said to the concerned missionary; “we just want to go home.” Her husband, Jupiter, had fought in the war and was one of several leaders of their little community who negotiated with the Bureau to let them go home. They explained that they would return to their old plantation and “contrac’ to work in the old fields,” expecting that they could

transform their former owners into employers, making their labor profitable for themselves too. After months of proving themselves capable of self-governance, the Bureau agreed to return them to Savannah.

Hattie watched as the boat became increasingly crowded, forcing mothers to hug their children tightly to “keep them from under foot.” Some crouched in corners while others leaned on railings, placing children on barrels, boxes, and coils of rope. A group of women, much like those who had hidden children in fields and barns from their masters to make their escape, lay on the floor of the boat, “as close as sardines in a box,” nursing a sick girl who lay across their laps. She watched the concerned face of a white missionary woman as she peered inside the tightly packed deck. Where Hattie saw anticipation, hope, and weariness from securing their hard-won freedom, the missionary clearly beheld misery. To her, they were still coping without blankets, or sufficient clothing and food supplies. To them they were free. “Thank God, I lives!” said an elderly woman; “Us is mending,” said another. That night Hattie and Jupiter joined their friends at a praise-meeting on the boat, raising songs and prayers to the Lord, expressing thanksgiving for “the bountiful mercies of God.” Their jubilation swayed the boat as much as the sea, baffling the missionary who assumed they were forgetting their former condition and present discomforts. Concerned about the timing and their seeming ignorance, the missionary asked Hattie, “Aunty, are you not going back too soon?” To which she responded, calmly, “I don’ know missis. I’specs there will be something for us to live on; de people mus’ have something fur eat. The good God will tuck care o’we. He *alluz* does.”¹

¹ This scene is taken from the account of Elizabeth Hyde Botume and reconstructed from the perspective of the nameless newly freed woman with whom she recounts her conversation. Elizabeth Hyde Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1893), 209-214.

* * *

Black women had strived throughout the war to secure and define their own freedom, without the guarantee of its permanence. The ending of the Civil War, and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, saw the official collapse of slavery and legitimized the project of Black freedom, a project which Black women had initiated on plantations and behind Union lines since shots were fired on Fort Sumter. Their arrival in Union occupied Norfolk, Virginia placed so much pressure on General Butler that he issued a general order making them “contraband.” That, in turn, gave way to the first and second Confiscation Acts.² These developments were the result of Black women, men, and children’s freedom pursuits, transforming Union occupation into free soil. While the passage of these acts made them “contraband,” keeping the formerly enslaved within the confines of their longstanding status as property, Black women’s movements and efforts behind Union lines demonstrated a rejection of that status as they consistently made claims to free personhood. Thus, Black women co-opted the subsequent Emancipation Proclamation, a military measure intended to further destabilize the Confederacy, to further their freedom building efforts. While the Proclamation did not alter the conditions or day-to-day experiences of Black women behind Union lines, it did provide many with even more of an impetus to risk running away. Similarly, the Thirteenth Amendment can be seen as the culmination of the conquering of the Confederacy, Black men’s military service, and the daily assertions of freedom that Black women made behind Union lines.

² Congress passed the First Confiscation Act in August 1861, which allowed the Union to seize property, including enslaved people, who were being used to support the Confederate war effort. The Second Confiscation Act, passed in early 1862, proved somewhat more radical than the first, allowing for the confiscation of Confederate property but also freeing the enslaved who reached Union conquered territory. It prohibited the return of fugitive slaves, declared the enslaved residing in any occupied territory free, and allowed the Union to recruit Black soldiers. James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865*, (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2013), 238.

Throughout the war, Black women made efforts to define and secure freedom. The group of 275 newly freedpeople aboard the *St. Helena* had taken the initiative to follow Sherman's army. Since then, they had lived on the Sea Islands for almost two years, building their free lives. At the close of the war, they desired to return home, but the Freedmen's Bureau refused to let them leave. Its agents and missionaries had their own ideas about what Black freedom entailed, even where the freedpeople should reside. The Bureau saw themselves as the engineers of Black freedom, even when their ideas conflicted with those of the Black women and men. After negotiations with the Bureau, the group was able to secure Federal transportation home. They knew that their legal freedom struck down wartime (and antebellum) restraints and that included their desire to return home.³ Much like they fled to Union lines, determined to build freedom, they wished to return to their plantations- their home- ready to negotiate and build their free lives. While the missionary believed them to be naive, and the Bureau believed they were returning too soon after the war, the newly freed believed that their home provided a measure of security to negotiate their freedom, and, having negotiated the same throughout the war, were well equipped to do so.

Black women's freedom posed a unique threat to the preservation of white supremacy in the postbellum South. While the incremental transformation of enslaved people's legal status throughout the war came partially as a result of Black women's pursuits of a total freedom, their

³ The conceptualization of the plantation where these former enslaved people had lived and worked as "home," contradicts the burgeoning terminology of "slave labor camp," and "carceral landscape" as coined by historians of slavery and capitalism. Although both of these terms convey the punitive reality of enslavement and the world made by enslavers and legal infrastructures, it also displaces the world the enslaved made for themselves. Evidently, for the group desiring to leave the Sea Islands, the plantation they had come from was "home," a place of significance beyond the traumatic. Therefore, retaining the use of "plantation" when referring to these sites of enslaved labor, allows for both the worlds of the enslavers and the enslaved to be historical realities. For "slave labor camp," see Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, (New York: Basic Books, 2014), xxii; For "carceral landscape," Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 209-243.

actions consistently challenged the established racial hierarchy. Leaving plantations to protect their children, to keep their families together, rejecting missionaries' authority over them and acting according to their own desires and value systems, and making claims to their master's abandoned properties were primarily assertions of personal freedoms that indirectly pushed the legal and political needle of freedom and challenged white supremacy. The Black missionaries who sought to make abolitionist ideals a reality among the freed people by challenging racism within the AMA (and likely other organizations) helped to undermine the racial hierarchy.

One legislative incident in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War in Tennessee illuminates the potential of Black women's freedom to overturn the racial hierarchy. When the Tennessee General Assembly gathered in Nashville in the summer of 1865, tensions were high. The session opened only four months after the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment and the state Constitutional Convention which saw marches by the newly freed men and women demanding voting and civil rights.⁴ Black male suffrage had been the topic of discussion at the convention. Black Tennesseans' petitions demanded that they not be treated as "an inferior degraded class," but be bestowed with full civil and political rights.⁵ Despite discussion of Black soldier suffrage at the Constitutional Convention, they decided to push the issue onto the agenda of the General Assembly in April. Thus, there was much to be decided by the state legislature, where a mixture of ex-Confederate and Union sympathetic parties gathered to discuss the future of Tennessee's social and political order. Pro-Union James R. Hood, who had been in support of Black soldiers' suffrage, rose from his seat and walked to the floor to present his bill, House Bill

⁴ Protests took place throughout the state on multiple occasions between 1864 and 1865, with Black convocations demanding "improvement of the states of their race through; emancipation military service, and education." The protests were led by emerging Black political leaders. as early as the 1864 election. John Cimprich, "The Beginning of the Black Suffrage Movement in Tennessee, 1864-1865," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (Summer 1980), 187-188.

⁵ Nashville *Times and True Union*, January 18, 1865, in *ibid*, 190.

no.10.⁶ He raised an unexpected issue: Tennessee's bastardy laws. Hood proposed that the current code which fined women five dollars and threatened them with imprisonment for failing to reveal the identity of their child's father be repealed. In its place, he suggested clause 1624 which fined the mother three dollars and required her to show that the child would not become a charge on the county.⁷ Seemingly, Hood intended to lighten the time and resources spent on bastardy cases. It also had the added benefit of lightening the penalties unwed women faced for concealing the identity of their children's father. In light of the growing struggle over Black civil and political rights, Hood's suggestion sparked controversy.

The floor descended into a chaotic debate. State senator Edmund Cooper, a lawyer and Unionist, objected to the bill because it would "necessitate the testimony of a colored woman against a white man," a legal impossibility in Tennessee. He continued, "to give a negro woman the power of placing, by her testimony, the support of her child on a white man, is placing... power in negro hands..." Aware of what motivated these objections, Hood poked the bear: "the wretch who keeps company with niggers should pay for his own licentiousness, not the county." His view caused more uproar, with some arguing that a whole new law would have to be written to cater to these new circumstances. Representative James Mullins, Republican and Union veteran, argued that there was a broader question of Black civil and political rights that had to be answered before "this minor part," could be, since "the subject holds in it a principle which stubs the whole sum." In other words, should Black women have civil rights. He went on to trace the origin of Black people to the Biblical flood, arguing their inherent inferiority. "He is wanting too

⁶ Representative James R. Hood was the editor of the *Chattanooga Gazette* and had been driven out of publishing during the war because of his pro-Union ideas. Gilbert E. Govan and James W. Livingood, "Chattanooga Under Military Occupation, 1863-1865," *The Journal of Southern History*, Feb 1951, Vol 17, No. 1, 28.

⁷ "House Bill No.10: An Act to Amend the Bastardy Laws," TG60, Box 276, Folder 5, Tennessee State Library and Archives.; "Proceedings in Cases of Bastardy, Section 1624, 5354-5275" in *The Code of Tennessee, Enacted by the General Assembly of 1857- '8*, 345, 943-945.

much in virtue, trust, to be allowed the power given by this bill,” he argued, suggesting that the bill be rejected, and the issue tabled for now.⁸ The assembly voted overwhelmingly against the bill, with the official record stating that a “colored woman having a bastard child should not be examined against a white person.” The assembly agreed to postpone the issue.⁹

Formerly enslaved women were not in the room for this discussion, much like they were not for all the other legislative assemblies that shaped the terms of their citizenship. Yet their desire to have sufficient support for their children, particularly with limited employment opportunities, posed a significant threat to the order of things. Claiming the support of wealthy white fathers, most of whom were fathers as a result of their sexual violence against Black women, was an action that the state had formerly legally obliged white women to take. But employed by Black women, this same law undermined the longstanding omnipotence of white men. It is unknown whether Black women had already attempted to use these laws (though it is probable) by the time the bill had been proposed, but even their potential ability to testify against wealthy white men was deemed unviable. While Black women simply sought to provide for their children, their freedom was powerful enough to cause a political and social ripple effect. By naming former slaveholders as fathers, Black women claimed rights to their wealth. Their testimony could also lead to the imprisonment of wealthy white men, damage their reputation, and redirect their family lineage, all of which threatened the racial stratification on which white supremacy rested.¹⁰

⁸ “Afternoon Session,” *Nashville Daily Union*, August 14, 1865.

⁹ House Journal of the First Session of the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee, 1865, Which Convened at Nashville Monday, April 3. (Nashville: C. Mercer, Printer to the State, 1865),50.

¹⁰ Bastardy laws of Tennessee, ratified in 1858, required “any single woman... delivered of a living child” be brought to the Justice of the Peace thirty days after giving birth, “to be examined on oath touching the father.” A woman who refused to disclose the father’s identity could be fined five dollars. If she shared the name, the court would issue a warrant for the man to appear before the Justice of the Peace where he could be jailed. Bail was set at \$250 if he refused to pay the mother, or, if he acquiesced, he would be “charged with the maintenance of the child,” an amount that “for the first year... shall not exceed forty dollars; for the second year thirty dollars; and for third

Though Black women did not define their freedom by their ability to undermine the social fabric of the South, their unique role in the future of America was not unknown to them. Prior to the Civil War, in Tennessee and throughout the South, the institution of slavery had been the foundation on which Black freedom had been defined, especially regarding childbirth. Colonial Virginia set the legal precedent almost two centuries earlier, by passing a law that tied the condition of enslavement to the mother.¹¹ As Jenifer Morgan argues, this law “defined all children born of the bodies of Black women as slaves, even if their fathers were white,” setting “in motion generations of violence” on Africans and African descended peoples in America.¹² This legal reality caused an ontological crisis for Black women by turning their reproductive capabilities into the very engine that perpetuated the institution of slavery. Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh argues that this cruel reality placed a unique burden on enslaved women that shaped how they “made critical decisions” and “the ethics that guided their actions” throughout enslavement.¹³ This reality weighed on enslaved women throughout the war and undeniably shaped their decisions and efforts to secure freedom and partake in authoring its definition. They understood that the Civil War presented them with the opportunity not only to free themselves,

year twenty dollars.” After three years, “the court shall dispose of such a child, in the manner conducive to its interests,” either being given to its alleged father, or “binding it out to some suitable person, in their discretion.” These statutes protected the state from becoming responsible for vagrant children by ensuring children were provided for by the father or a “suitable person.” It thus offered white women a degree of protection and security no matter how the child was conceived. The thoroughness of Tennessee Bastardy laws made provisions for a variety of circumstances, including a man falsely accused; a man who claimed to be the father to the denial of the woman before and after giving birth. None of this applied in the case of a Black mother and accused white father. The containment that the institution of slavery offered antebellum white Tennesseans, allowed them to make “rape committed upon a free white female,” punishable by death, but the rape of a Black woman or bastardy of her child by a white man legally invisible and thus without legal or social ramifications for the father. “Proceedings in Cases of Bastardy, Section 5354-5275” in *The Code of Tennessee, Enacted by the General Assembly of 1857-’8*, 943-945; “Article III: Offences Punishable by Death, Section 2625.5,” in *ibid*, 509.

¹¹ William Waller Hening, (ed.), *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619*. (New York: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1823), 2:170.

¹² Jenifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, (College Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 70, 69.

¹³ Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh, *The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Chapel Hill, 2021), 2,3.

but to bring about generational freedom by “transform[ing] the meaning of reproduction in their lives.”¹⁴ The very infrastructure that had rendered them powerless in enslavement, now presented them with power that struck fear into white legislators and created a space for Black women to enter the local and national discussion about the future of the nation.

Ultimately, Black women’s day-to-day, interpersonal altercations with missionaries, Union officials, and other actors who sought to define their freedom for them, and their assertions of seemingly minor freedoms, held within them significantly more power than has been appreciated by Civil War historians. Formerly enslaved women operated behind Union lines like a battalion of their own, taking on the covert battle that lay at the heart of the war: the battle over the definition of Blackness and Black freedom in America. This definition would not be constructed by the ideologues of either slavery or abolition, nor entirely by the laws of the land. Black women understood that the freedom they sought required them to “fight for liberty,” by confronting their racialized and gendered subjugation in their everyday lives. The freedom they valued required legislative support but would not be a reality without their own efforts.

Throughout the war, Black women strove to claim protection of themselves and loved ones from violence. They valued proximity to family and kin. They insisted upon the ability to choose romantic partners, have expectations of them, and prioritize these relationships. They struggled for the ability to support and care for their children and enable a childhood free from the harsh realities of enslavement. They protected the vulnerable among them. Finally, they reclaimed authority over their own bodies and decision-making. These were the central definitions of Black freedom according to Black women. Though they were separated by class,

¹⁴Leslie A. Schwalm, “Between Slavery and Freedom: African American Women and Occupation in the Slave South,” in LeeAnn Whites and Alicia P. Long (eds), *Occupied Women: Gender and Military Occupation and the American Civil War*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 139.

Black missionary women were members of the same battalion, confronting race-based mistreatment within the aid organizations they worked for, which alluded to the larger and longer battle that would continue even after freedom had been secured. The struggle to define Black freedom in the south and the nation would continue long after the battlefields were cleared, through Reconstruction and beyond. “Us is mending,” an elderly woman stated, illuminating the lack of finality that the war’s end and returning home afforded them. Newly freedwomen like her, and the woman who declared that “God will tuck care o’we,” had learned from all they had encountered behind Union lines, and knew that the building of freedom had only just begun.¹⁵

Upon first encountering Black women’s battle song. “we must fight for liberty,” the white missionary, Elizabeth Hyde Botume, declared that the women did not understand freedom as well as the Black men who were securing their freedom on the battlefield.¹⁶ But it is clear that she was mistaken; the enslaved women understood and took part in the intricacies of securing and defining the freedom they had long hoped for.

¹⁵ Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband*, 214.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 152.

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